Foreword

Rujuta and I worked together on *Tashan* and the rest, as they say, is history. It won't be wrong to say that we entirely disrupted the diet scene. *Ghar ka khaana* and bikini bod, once thought of as mutually exclusive, were being spoken about in the same breath.

But now all around me, I find people drowning in trends – from seeds to shots, keto to cleanses. Ironically, all this in the name of health. The foundation of good health, though, is habits; boring – but that is the truth. The habit of eating *ghar ka khaana*, exercising, sleeping early and minding one's own business, serve the best to those interested in health. The rest is just signing up for a longer route in the hope of a short cut.

So, while Rujuta and I started working together in 2007, the things that I have learnt from her continue to stay a part of my life and even my family's. In fact, the reason why I even worked with her was because she didn't have an extreme approach towards fitness. It was a finely calibrated one and I had no intentions of ever giving up on paratha, Sindhi curry and now the pasta that Saif cooks when he's in the mood.

Basically, I come from a line of women who respect and celebrate both food and hard work. My mother would eat rice and fish curry for lunch during her shooting years. My sister,

the hardest working girl I know, really knows how to eat. So thankfully, I never saw food as the enemy of fitting into good clothes, having good skin, etc., but rather an accomplice that enables those goals.

Today I have taken on many new roles – producer, homemaker, mother and wife; so I have new appreciation for food. It's not something that helps me with just my waistline but with my bandwidth to pursue it all without running out of fuel. I want to take in the full joy of my boys running in school races, of giving the perfect shot on a film set, of hedging my bets on the best script.

And while I am married to my co-actor from *Tashan*, I am not married to the way I looked in the film. Our bodies, work and relationships, must evolve and stand the test of time. Looking exactly like the way one looked 10 or 20 or 30 years ago is stagnating, not stunning.

An old piece of furniture fades, and pages of an old book, pale. That's where, as Saif says, the beauty lies. In the age and the authenticity it carries with it. To me, health is just that, an act of liberating ourselves from external pretenses. In embracing our age, our bodies, with the flaws, fine lines, hell – even a bit of a paunch. And in surrounding ourselves with people who see us worthy of good food, good roles and good holidays.

Life, after all, is about coming of age. It's about knowing that true joy lies in a hot bowl of khichdi eaten with a crunchy papad while watching your husband read aloud to the boys at bedtime. Looking good is about savouring small joys in real time and not about how thin you looked in reels.

Kareena Kapoor Khan
Mumbai

Introduction

It was 2009 and just a few months after the release of my first book *Don't Lose Your Mind, Lose Your Weight*. I had finished giving a talk in Indore which had about four hundred people in the audience. I was feeling good, very good about myself. As I was making my way towards the car, a lady pulled me by my elbow and asked, '*Yeh wahi hai na, woh* Kareena Kapoor *wali*, don't break my head, just lose weight.'

'Haan,' I nodded, feeling even better *ke faltu mein udne ka nahi*.

The book had intrigued many people. For the first time there was a desi way to lose weight. But more importantly, Kareena Kapoor had lost weight on it, making room for the rich, glam brigade to look at ghee, khichdi, even parathas, with new eyes. *Ghar ka khaana ka* status had gotten elevated; it was now the bikini-bod diet.

I began working in 1999 officially but had been on the gym-aerobics-diet circuit since 1997–98. When I started out, only filmy people were into fitness. After all, looking a certain way mattered to them. And because of their influence, some

industrialists too had joined their ranks. But regular people weren't 'into health' the way they are now.

Today, however, everyone wants to look like a movie star. We want a flat stomach if not a six pack, a slim if not skinny body and a sharp if not a taut jawline. Social media is full of 'transformation' pics, and everyone is an expert on health and fitness. The fintech guy, the liver guy, the branding guy – everyone has health advice for you. People put their HbA1c, BMI, resting heart rate on their bio. They even pin posts of their fastest sprint, longest cycling day, heaviest dead lift, whatever.

Appearance

My partner, GP, is from UC Berkeley. One of his closest friends, who lives in the Bay Area, was visiting us. The friend worked with Lyft at the time. He was one of their most senior executives. He told us that one day he was at a meeting with the founder. After it ended, the founder had to go into another meeting so he went to change and came out with his hair ruffled, wearing a crumpled T-shirt and ill-fitting jeans. GP's friend was puzzled. 'Well, that's the "look",' the founder explained. Basically, when you are the start-up guy, the genius working in the garage with a ground-breaking idea that is scalable, etc., you'd better look it. Only then are the VCs going to loosen their purse strings.

The lesson of this story is simple: We all need to look the part, or at least that's what we are told. If it's a professional requirement, like being formally dressed when you are a doctor or a judge, etc., it's ok. But when you make an external image of an internal state of being, then you goof up. Big time. I am talking about health.

Health is not about maintaining appearances. It's not the six-pack, the weight loss, the skinny jeans or your fasting sugars, running efficiency or sleep score. It's about living a kinder, gentler life. It empowers us to live more freely, openly, fully. When people are scared or shamed into getting 'healthier', it just doesn't work. Fear and shame are the opposite of love. Love can move mountains, and you need that positive force in your life, because building health and staying healthy is a job for a lifetime. This means that it is about monotonous, repetitive, routine habits that you do with a fresh perspective, daily. And you can have that kind of commitment only when there is love.

They say Sachin Tendulkar would be the first one to show up at the nets to practise. His seniority or the stardom he enjoyed or how much he scored in the previous match didn't matter. That's how you get a hundred 100s – keep your head down and bat.

That's also what the legendary basketball player Michael Jordan had said – it's all about practice. If you practice every

day, when you get to the moment, you don't have to think about it. Things happen instinctively. It's the same for your health. It will come through like a class act when it really matters, but the everyday practice of it means doing the same old boring stuff, day in, day out.

What's health anyway?

One of my favourite quotes about health comes from the great yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar. 'Health is where you forget about your body.' I once heard a story that elaborated on this idea. It was 2005. I was sitting on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh, listening to Swami Dayananda Saraswati speak. I tend to find *bhashans* too preachy, and the ones that come from swamis can also be very boring. But that day, Swami Dayananda made all of us in the audience laugh and nod in amusement and recognition. I guess this is what it means to be a good speaker: one who knows how to connect. He simplified what others mystified.

Swamiji was talking about meditation, and he acted out the stereotype we all have about it. He closed his eyes, did a mudra with his hands and inhaled and exhaled loudly. The crowd giggled. Rishikesh is full of banners depicting meditation like this – three- to thirty-day courses are available, and even come with a certificate. Meditation, he said, is not what you can see outside but what is happening inside. It isn't what the world sees about you but what you see about the world.

He told us a story. One day he was at Haridwar station, taking a train to Delhi. The station was bustling and noisy, but he saw a young woman sleeping on the platform with a baby beside her, undisturbed by the commotion. She had covered her face with her saree pallu to keep the flies away. One hand was bent over her forehead, the other hand she placed on her infant's tummy. After a while her baby woke up and moved; the woman turned towards the baby's side, pallu still covering her face, eyes still closed.

The baby got on all fours and crawled a bit. His mother didn't move. Emboldened, he took some more steps away from her. Then, with eyes still closed, she stretched out her hand and pulled the baby back. This happened a couple of times, and soon enough the baby learnt where he could crawl out to without risking being pulled back.

This woman, Swamiji said, should be your meditation teacher. Not some old, saffron-clad, bearded man, he added, referring to himself. Learning to do your duties without being disturbed by the commotion outside, letting your thoughts know where they can go and pulling them back every time they wandered beyond the *seema*, the boundary – this was meditation.

Meditation is for everyone, whether you are a young mother, a coder, a householder, a mathematician. It is an inner state. It's about forgetting that you have a child and taking a nap, but not letting the child forget that it has a parent. It's about not forgetting your true essence, your *astitva*, your true being. Meditation is about being at ease.

It's a lesson I feel is valid for health, too. It's about being at ease with the body, or being in the state where you forget about the body. And yet the body knows that it will get pulled back if it does wander. It's about being at ease with the changes it goes through, the food we eat, the life we lead. It's less about the displays outside, whether it's counting steps in the day or our heart rate in the night, and more about not losing *din ka chain* and *raat ki neend*. Our life will have its ups and downs, but there is no need to lose that sense of ease with oneself. '*Babumoshai, zindagi badi honi chahiye, lambi nahi*,' said Rajesh Khanna to Amitabh Bachchan in the movie *Anand*.

In a *badi zindagi*, it's about knowing that if one's weight, HbA1c, BP or cholesterol climbs a bit, then before running after the numbers you do the first things first. Turn to your side and stretch your hand to pull them back. A healthy person knows that you can forget the numbers, but they should not forget that you are watching them.

So, what does this mean in real life? It's about being less conflicted about food choices, to begin with. Eating correctly is pretty commonsensical and not half as complicated as it's made out to be. Before people try the basics – eating more at home, ordering less from outside, making exercise a part of life, sleeping on time – they download apps, programs and hire professionals who run them out of the money, confidence and bandwidth needed to lead a normal life.

We seem to have forgotten that between doing nothing and chasing weight loss or health as a life goal, there lies a state

where just being aware or watchful about food, exercise and sleep could reap excellent results. That's the state where you can watch over the child, nap, stop flies from sitting on your face and still not miss the train. A state where you could literally do it all, optimally. Because an optimum life is one where health and happiness is default and not goals to be chased.

Happy weight

Post three babies, my editor, now in her late forties, said to me that she only follows what I say (credit *toh mein bohot logo ke* good shape and good looks *ka khati hu*). So she lost all her weight after the baby. 'Very good, Chiki,' I said to her, 'And you look fab.'

'Thanks, but now I am 60 kg. You know, all my life I have been 54 kg but now I don't stress about it. I call this my happy weight. The weight I keep while I exercise, eat all my food, have a drink here and there, and manage work and kids.'

'Chiki, our bodies change, there's no such thing as "all my life",' I told her. 'This is life too. With two kids, one husband, one start-up, staff, work, an office to look after, yoga to do, authors to chase, deals to crack – for all you know 54 kg was just your "happy weight" for the last decade. If you had been strict then, maybe you would have been 48 kg at the time. But then you would have been so uptight and stressed about keeping that weight that you wouldn't have built half the life you have now.'

The thing is that at 58 kg or 53 kg (or 65 or 60, 85 or 82), we look pretty much the same – in good shape, and even fit. There is nothing to be achieved by going 5 kg under at all costs. But there is a lot to lose – sanity, focus and, most importantly, joy. So, the realization that the happy weight shifts every decade has to come. But even for that, you must eat right.

Transformations

Radhika came to my office all dressed up. 'I want a selfie with you,' she told me when I entered the room. Only thirty-five, she had been dieting since she was fifteen. 'Two times I have done drastic transformation, once for my wedding (at nineteen), 85 to 50 kilos, and then after childbirth (at twenty-five), from 90 to under 60 kilos.' She had been to eight famous dietitians and ten not-so-famous ones. 'I have given good results to everyone,' she told me proudly. *Kabhi khud pe, kabhi halat pe rona aaya,* was playing in my mind, and then she broke down.

Sniffling, she said to me, 'I didn't want to look like this, pointing to her running kajal. I want to look good in the selfie.'

'You will,' I assured her, 'meeting *ke baad mein lete hain* photo.'

Then she cried through the whole meeting, poor thing. 'When I look back at my pics, I wonder why I was thinking

that I am fat,' she said mournfully. (If I had a rupee for every time I have heard this, I would beat the Ambanis at net worth). Calorie counting, step counting, low fat, low carb, detox, fasting, panchakarma, juicing, Ayurvedic cleanses and clinics, and at least eight celeb dietitians later, her weight was now in the triple digits.

And here she was, hoping for another transformation – she had signed up for my three-month program. '*Abhi body ko nahi,* attitude *ko transform karenge,*' I told her. '*Apne ko* approach *naya lena padega.* This time you do it slowly, sustainably. *Jo baat sui se ho sakti hai, wahan talwar nahin vaprenge.*'

Radhika had listed three program outcomes for herself: 1. Drastic transformation, 2. Don't like being fat, want to get thin, and 3. Get rid of my health problems and have good skin.

But what she was really looking for was something totally different. It was love, acceptance, approval. What was missing in her and in many people I work with isn't discipline, will power or consistency, but an inability to pursue fulfilment, meaning and purpose. Constantly being in the loop of dieting takes us far away from finding that real connect, purpose and joy in life. And no amount of weight loss or transformation can substitute for the real thing. The real thing is to have the fuel to live a full life. Train, baccha, nap, *sab kuchh.*

On science, statistics and stories

Science has made tremendous progress in understanding and describing how our world works, including how we work. But any scientist worth their salt will summarize our current knowledge of the human body[1] as follows: 'We know a lot more than before, but there is so much more yet to know.' From our brain to our gut to our hormones and immune system, there is so much we don't understand fully. But we are making progress every day, and surely in our lifetime we will know ourselves a lot better.

Especially in the field of nutrition, and health in general, where our current best research methods are just not adequate to account for the complex interactions and effects of the environment, pollution, stress, exercise, genes, hormones, neurotransmitters, gut microbiome, etc., on our body, our health and our well-being. The reductionist approach, of breaking down food to its basic molecules and studying them in isolation, has left us with huge gaps in our understanding of food and its relationship with health.

The randomized control trials (RCTs) and the associated statistics are the gold standard in drug trials, where it allows us to tease out the impact of a single ingredient/medicinal compound vis-à-vis a placebo. But in nutrition science, it is extremely difficult to design and implement an RCT due to many inherent and practical factors.[2]

Most of the studies are therefore observational, and although we have collected huge amounts of data, the

problems of selective reporting and over-interpreting a single study out of context, and so on, have led to more confusion than clarity. Not to mention the very important statistical and scientific measure of reproducibility,[3] i.e., the need for scientific claims to be replicated by independent researchers, which is, to say the least, missing big time. Combine that with the high degree of interference by the food and weight-loss industries in basic research, and we are on a very sticky wicket.

In the absence of clarity from research and data, we tend to rely more on stories, and once we are in that realm, the story that you hear most often wins, regardless of how scientifically and statistically sound it is. Just like you can design your study in a way that certain outcomes are guaranteed, you can tell the story that best suits your interests. And if you are the food industry, that interest is profits. Social media, with its confident influencers and slick reels, plays a big role in ensuring we hear that story loud and clear, and repeatedly.

So, what's our best bet? Science, statistics and stories, again. A fundamental way in which science progresses is through trial and error, and that's exactly how ancient cultures have fine-tuned their cuisine and crop cycles, ensuring that they get the best nutrition from the available resources and made steady progress in their health outcomes. Our ancestors have done all the hard work and left us with their wisdom, not in the form of research papers, yes, but as recipes, food combinations, rules, and so on – a different format but by no means lacking in scientific rigour.

They have also helped resolve some of the biggest limitations in statistics – the size of the sample set and the duration of the study – by conducting their trials at the population level, over centuries, in real-world living conditions (instead of 'under lab conditions'). And all this science and statistics reaches us in the form of oral wisdom – as stories, songs and proverbs on food and living that our grandmothers tell us gently, in a language of love. Across the globe, across all native cultures, this wisdom has one thing in common – it has the hallmark of **common sense,** and when it comes to food, nutrition and health, it is the **gold standard** to aspire for.

This book

And that's why this book. It has three sections: Diets, *Ghar Ka Khaana* and Commonsense Eating and Living. I wanted to keep the focus on two things: 1. Avoiding dieting and instead eating *ghar ka khaana* is not just commonsense, it is also what the latest in nutrition science is advocating, and 2. Following some commonsense guidelines and rules of *ghar ka khaana,* you can gain health, lose weight and save yourself the time and stress that modern dieting brings, thereby utilizing your bandwidth for the more meaningful pursuits in life.

I have liberally used real conversations with my clients as a means to emphasize a point, and in a language that is relatable. In fact, as much as possible, I have avoided technical jargon as I feel what we all are looking for is *seedhi baat, no*

bakwaas. In addition to real examples, there are, as always, boxes – for emphasis, anecdotes, additions – to the main text of the chapters. Last but not the least, there are real diet recalls, along with modifications, to kind of put all the learnings in clear 'what to do' terms.

But underneath these practical sections run some bigger questions: What does it mean to be healthy? What role does food play? What is a full life? I wrote this book so that you don't short-change yourself into just getting thin or losing weight, or looking at forty how you did at twenty and somehow think that this makes up for living a full life. Our aim as humans is to change, to grow, to adapt and to even die, but with fuel in the tank so that it is a worthy ride. If my first book was about size zero, then this one is about living one hundred per cent. It's about gaining health and not about losing weight. Will you lose weight while at it? Yes. But it will also give you the zest and solace of having lived fully, wholly, freely.

Happy reading!

Rujuta Diwekar
Mumbai

Same old diets

They say that the more things change, the more they remain the same. *Same as Ever* also happens to be the latest hit book by Morgan Housel about how some things never change, no matter what. I especially love Housel's story of the legendary marathon runner Eliud Kipchoge, because my team and I had heard him speak at a sports conference in Newcastle in 2014 and loved his low-key, confident vibe.

In his book, Housel talks about how, after winning the marathon in the Tokyo Olympics, Kipchoge was sitting in a staging room with the silver and bronze winners, waiting to receive his medal. The three men had to sit in that cramped room for many hours before the ceremony. The two other runners spent their time on their phones while Eluid sat there calmly the entire time, staring at the wall in front of him, as if taking all of it in.

Housel observed that extra-human performances come always from people who don't seem human, who are a little distanced from human emotions that one would typically

experience. And how this quality runs through most of the world's super achievers no matter what they have done and when.

There is something similar going on in the dieting world as well. Regardless of what the diet is and when it was introduced, the feature that runs through all of them is deprivation. And even when the old diets come back with new names, the deprivation stays. So, Atkins is keto, low calorie is low carb, skipping dinner is now skipping breakfast/intermittent fasting, and not eating anything at all is cleanse/detox. *Naam bade, darshan chhote.* Dirtier, nastier, noisier. Dieting is now a 'lifestyle'. People are on all sorts of lifestyles, and everything is getting cultish and sensitive. You may say anything about their mother but not about their diets.

If you have lived in Mumbai, you have seen it go from Bombay to Mumbai, Elphinstone Road to Prabhadevi. While I am all for reclaiming heritage and using the vernacular, this still hurts. It hurts because other than changing the name, the self-serving politicians aspire to change nothing else. We remain subjects and not citizens. Our cities are still poorly planned, the garbage is still piling, the civic problems still exist and, in fact, have exponentially increased. So what does this name change achieve?

Now, if you bring mass mobility, walkability, green cover and maidans to the city, then you achieve health for many versus profits for a few. That's how you write your name on our hearts instead of plastering your face on hoardings. *Aur waise bhi*, a rose is still a rose, *koi bhi naam se pukaro*. Diets are

exactly like that – postured as better because of the change in their names, but still leaving your wallet thin, not your waist.

'Sciency'

So, what's new in 2025? This time, the same old diets and the underlying deprivation are dressed up in 'science' – a lot of it. Food, or eating right, is no longer wholesome or nurturing, it is 'scientific'. I like the term 'sciency' better. Because that's all that it really is.

Science, actually, is pretty simple. Like love, it is repeatable and reproducible. Prashant Damle, a celebrated Marathi stage actor, has a beautiful couplet which sends his audience wild – *'Prem mhanje prem mhanje prem asta, tumcha aani aamcha, ekdum same asta.'* ('Love is love. Whether it's yours or ours, it's exactly the same.') It's *sadak chhaap* for the principles of repeatability and reproducibility. When you love, you have feelings of warmth and tenderness for that person over and over again, to the end of time.

'Through thick and thin, health and sickness' is not a vow we make only when we get married. When there's love, this becomes default. Reproducibility means that when others are in love, their lives are uplifted, just like yours, with the same experience of warmth and tenderness. In science, repeating an experiment over and over is an important step to check that your result is not a matter of chance but actual facts.

Let's say you think cutting back on starch or carbs is crucial, so you quit rice. If you have a scientific bent of mind,

you must check if it gets you to lose weight every time. Mostly, it will be: 'It worked for me at twenty-five, but at twenty-seven it's not working,' so it's not repeatable. And reproducibility would mean that all non-rice eaters would be, by default, thin, but we know that people in rice-dominant cultures, be it in Himachal or Northeast India, are not fat. You can replace rice with anything that you believe is 'scientific' at the moment – intermittent fasting, spice shots, cleanses – and you will have different results with the same person every time.

So the basic test of scientific rigour is not fulfilled. Anything that is not repeatable and reproducible is 'sciency', a random occurrence due to conditions not fully accounted for or understood. Just because some self-appointed guardian on X or influencer on Insta or an article on the front page of a newspaper shouts it out or a video on it goes viral, it does become solid science. It remains just that – sciency.

To make matters more complicated, now there is also dressing of culture. If nutrition science is saying eat local, as per time-tested traditions, the nutrition industry is all geared up to monetize that too. It has responded by picking up single ingredients from ancient cultures (turmeric, for example) and turning them into miracle foods, and appropriating ancient practices like fasting into weight-loss fads.

Closer home, you can see the market for 'herbal', '*satvik*' products booming along with practices like consuming seeds and spices as shots, doing gut cleanses, and the like. 'But it is part of our ancient tradition' is now added to the 'but this is scientific' argument. It is now hard to tell the pseudo-science from the pseudo-cultural.

The pursuit of the futile

They say there is no such thing as an original thought or idea. Everything that you can think about or write about has already been thought and written about. Long before *Same as Ever* highlighted how the same things are at work, Sage Patanjali, in his seminal work, *The Yoga Sutras*, expounded on the *kleshas* (faults) that keep us engaged in the futile. *Raga*, *dvesha*, *abhinivesha* exist within each one of us, and can be used to manipulate us into doing unreasonable things. You will see that with the dieting world too.

Raga is loosely translated as 'attachment'. The attachment to your body can be used to get you on a diet that will make you look even more attractive or thinner. Reminds me of a client of mine who went on a diet when she was 56 kg to look thinner for her engagement. She was twenty-four at the time. When we next met, she was forty-two, and she said, 'Looking back, I wonder what was I even thinking, because today, even if I get under 80 kg, I will dance with joy.'

Dvesha translates to a kind of hatred. Hating the way one looks is also used to put people on a diet, and then you are automatically off all the food that provides you comfort. So no more rice for you, only protein, and if you can't poop, get some fibre or laxatives. It's not good enough that you hate the way you look, you must also hate all that you eat.

Abhinivesha, the will to live long or not die. 'Don't eat sugar, it is killing you.' So going off fresh fruit or drinking *feeki chai*, or fasting for long hours to extend your life, etc.

The wellness and weight-loss industry has always deployed *raga*, *dvesha* and *abhinivesha* to their benefit, but today it is amplified by social media. And the industry is booming like never before. Where once it had school dropouts or low scorers (like me) struggling to make a living, it is now awash with funding, attracting the IIT, IIM, Ivy League types, who want last-mile connectivity for diets. Coach, Dt., are the new titles. And doctors – from gynaecologists to cardiologists – are offering food, exercise and relationship advice for visibility and traction.

The lucrative field is now also a second career option those who are bored with being chartered accountants, media professionals, programmers and the like. *Behti Ganga mein sabko haath dhona hai.* And your next-door neighbour is just three months and one social media account away from being the newest expert in town. Or maybe everyone was always an expert but now they are using good lighting, good angles and algorithms to land on your timeline.

Chhaapkar bikte the joh kabhi,
bik kar chhaapte hain woh abhi

What would once sell after being published is now sold first and then published. Someone said this about *akhbaars* (mainstream newspapers) and when I first heard it, I didn't understand what it meant. They were talking about paid articles coming across as news and the loss of transparency in general. Years have passed, but this *kahawat* has stayed with me. Mostly because I receive emails that read, 'Hi Madam. Below are the media-approved headlines, can you please write an 800-word article on "Ignorance leads to protein deficiency amongst students and working professionals", "Protein myths busted", "Alarming health impacts of protein deficiency", "Your breakfast lacks 80% protein", etc.' The page, the space and the headline are locked first, and the article is written by a 'credible voice' later.

Earlier, this was limited to films or politics, but now the trend has penetrated every sphere of life. And food and fitness are probably the most 'written' about. Social media marketing has made advertorials masked as editorials look lame and harmless in comparison. From ₹1,500 crores in 2023, the social media influencer market in India is set to grow to a whopping ₹3,375 crores in 2026. By 2029, we are expected to be the largest social media market. Influencers will tell you everything you need to know – what to wear, what to eat, what to think. And we will all be consuming advertisements masked as information, science or secrets.

So, in this section, we look at both the 'sciency' diets and the 'pseudo-cultural' trends, and why they don't work.

1

'Sciency' diets

1. Playing with nutrients – high protein/ low carb, etc.

'That's it, Rujuta ben, I just couldn't do it anymore,' said Hiral bhai to me, in response to my question – what made him get off his diet. He was a forty-two-year-old insurance broker with a twelve-year-old son, a wife, parents and a booming business to look after. He was always overweight, but after turning forty he had decided, *iss baar NO sau paar*. From 112 kg he had dropped to 96 kg in less than two months, but now it had become challenging to keep up with the diet. His target was 75 kg, but he couldn't bear the thought of following his diet for even one more day!

'*Kya diet hai aap ka*?' I asked. Fifty-two cubes of cheese a week and 1 kg of paneer! With that he was allowed some boiled veggies and one bowl of sprouts a day. Boiled veggies *mein bhi* only broccoli and bhindi, no aloo or *kacha kela*, and *agar rice khane ka man hua* (only if he was really lacking in

will power), he was allowed 'rice' made out of cauliflower. And his treat was an almond-flour khakra filled with seeds, or a flourless chocolate cake. '*Mohanthal wala cake kaisa khayega? Term cover wale ko money-back chipka diya.* Only agent is making money. *Waise* my dietitian is now saying constipation *hai toh fibre supplement lo. Neend nahi aati hai toh magnesium supplement lo.*'

You talk to the guy, he's smart. He says his business has solid potential. Most of India is not insured and he plans to change that. 'But insurance,' he said, '*dil aur trust ka mamla hai. Kya hai, bure waqt mein agent ne dhoka diya toh business khallas.*' He said from fire to house to medical to car to accident claims, *kitna bhi magaj lage*, he ensures that his client gets the money. Especially in case of an untimely death. The family must not suffer.

'Hiral bhai,' I said, '*yeh cheese cubes, paneer meals and cauli rice banake bhi family suffer hi hota hai. Marne ki zaroorat hi nahi hai.*'

'That's right,' he said. 'My wife is saying that *tere ko abhi na neend aati hai, na potty, sirf gussa aata hai.*'

The thing with diets getting nastier is that people on them are getting angrier. Having been in this profession all my adult life, I can tell you one thing for sure – being 'hangry' is real. People are still hungry even if they are now 'allowed' the foods that used to be on the 'strictly avoid' list, like cheese and paneer. I mean, on paper, adding fat to the diet adds satiety, regulates appetite and reduces cravings, but if this comes with

no roti, rice or just plain, regular meals, then it's nothing short of a nightmare.

It's one thing to eat fifty-two cubes of cheese over a year, quite another to eat them all in just one week. Somewhere in the 'they got it all wrong, you should have been eating fat all along' we forget that we are *still* getting it wrong. I mean, my *thakela* joke is that *pehle dukhi log pav bhaji mein butter avoid karte the, ab woh pav avoid karte hai.*

Carb fear

the irrational belief that eating home-cooked meals like roti-sabzi, dal-chawal, poha, upma, idli, dosa, thepla, etc., makes one fat or sick, or that they are inadequate in nutrition.

Even if one is not as extreme as Hiral bhai, there is at least some version of carb fear and protein scarcity that everyone feels. Today, a high-protein diet is regarded not just as *the* way to lose weight but also to 'reverse' diseases, no matter how sick you feel doing it. The popular idea nowadays for weight loss is to reduce carbs and increase protein intake. This builds on the general perception that we are all taking in too many carbs and too little protein.

Carb fear among athletes

Every year, me and my team try to attend at least one major international conference on nutrition and/or exercise to keep ourselves up to date with the latest in science and also to present findings from the public health projects we regularly undertake. In December 2022, at the International Sports and Exercise Nutrition conference (ISENC) in Manchester, UK, a session highlighted the carb fear among athletes. The professor spoke about how ageing and most troubles that it brings were to do with loss of muscle strength. And while losing muscle strength with age was inevitable, exercise and protein were good interventions to both preserve and slow down the rate of loss. But the key, the speaker had said, was to have a lot of muscle to begin with. So, while exercise in old age mattered, what mattered even more was the level of activity and athleticism as an adolescent. Exercise worked optimally when the elderly were active adolescents. That way, they had a muscle bank to draw from, a neuromuscular pathway that just needed some brushing up, etc. And this was useful even if they were not very active in their middle age.

Similarly, the other intervention of protein worked optimally when there was no carb fear. The speaker went on to define carb fear as an irrational fear of eating regular foods like fruits, nuts, grains, legumes, etc. When protein was consumed at the cost of wholesome food, it didn't work like the way it was meant to – adding muscle size and strength.

Instead, it took away from the gains that could be made. And as human life extends, diseases are going to come to everyone's homes, so the conversation is going to shift to health outcomes. If two people of the same age get the same disease (her research was on the size of tumours), then the chances of death, recurrences and complications were reduced for those with better muscle strength.

Kirti's misfortune

The eat-more-protein-and-cut-carbs bug has bitten everybody. My mom is a little over seventy, a retired organic chemistry teacher whose friends are all high and mighty in intellect. One afternoon, they were having a get-together at their friend, Pratibha's. The grey hair and grey cells were going to share a good meal and a good laugh. Some of them had lost their partners to death and their children to foreign soil. But they hadn't lost their spirit or the will for debate, gossip and food. But then my mom's confidante, Kirti, called and said, 'Rekha, I can't come.' 'Why?' my mother demanded. 'Listen, I must eat 45 grams of protein for lunch and I can't ask Pratibha to do that.'

My mother's bff had done her blood tests and her HbA1c was 5.9. She had been advised to lose weight. Her weight is 57 kg. She is seventy-four years old, is driven and committed in all aspects of her life, so she was going to fix this. Naturally.

Her doctor had put her on a 'protein-rich' diet – no sugar, no carbs, a green smoothie daily or 100 g of boiled greens at every meal.

She was game for it, anything to avoid having her kids let go of their lives and take care of her in her old age, even if it meant avoiding gup-shup with the girl gang she had been friends with for half a century.

'No way,' my mother said. She called Pratibha, and Pratibha called Kirti. 'Kirti, you must come, don't worry about me. *Mein laga degi cooker mein tere liye 45 g of chhole. Khali seeti hi toh marna hai.* You come.' So Kirti came and ate only the boiled chhole.

My mother had brought tomato saar. 'Have this,' she said to her, 'instead of the green smoothie.'

'But Rekha, this has sugar, right?'

'But only 1 tsp between six of us and six tomatoes.'

Another friend had gotten vangi kaap, tava-roasted aubergine that uses rava and rice flour, but she lied to Kirti and said, 'I didn't put rice flour because Pratibha called me and said that you are avoiding rice.'

I think the way to reverse diseases naturally is to invest in a girl gang. They don't judge you when you go off-track and always bring you back into the fold. They always let you be, they scold you a bit, they lie to you a bit, but they let you be. And honestly, sometimes that's all you need.

Kirti was a quintessentially disciplined Tam Bram. She cooked all her meals at home, led a regulated life and always had her weight in check. She did three days of yoga a week

and had continued online even during the pandemic. That's how her lipid profile was good, her triglycerides well under 150 and her thyroid was healthy. But *saala* HbA1c was out of range, so *baat khatam.* This test result had come post-pandemic, when she was seventy-four years old. Her medical advice should have used context – the anxiety of the lockdown, kids abroad, etc.

A woman who ate everything at home, prayed, invested four to five hours in yoga every week and got to seventy-five without a single disease should be spared of radical advice, an unrealistic diet in this case. Her routine, in fact, should be studied. She should be appreciated for looking after herself so well. At the most she could be asked to add a day of strength training every week, resume regular activities and repeat the test after three months.

Carbs are not the bad boy

Eliminating carbs is not the magic pill it's made out to be and doesn't work, just like eliminating fat didn't work years ago.

1. People who advise you to cut down carbs and increase fibre for weight loss, diabetes, etc., are contradicting themselves in the same breath. Grains, millets, legumes are excellent sources of fibre, and not just fruits or green leafy vegetables.
2. Avoiding carbs – paratha, dosa, bhakri, roti, rice, poha, upma, and so on – deprives the body of wholesome

nutrition, and leads to palate and bodily fatigue. Aches, pains, poor sleep and digestion, etc.

3. Without carbs, the brain experiences loss of fuel, decision-making becomes difficult, and there is confusion – 'brain fog' – irritability and anxiety.

Kirti followed her diet diligently, became a gaunt 49 kg from 57 kg and lowered her HbA1c to 5.6. But soon enough, signs of weakness began to show. She now needed her maid to help her into her blouse. Her shoulders hurt. She began to avoid backbends in yoga because her back and knees would hurt. She started getting restless legs and sleepless nights. Her digestion got poorer. But she attributed all that to her age and not to the changes she had made in her diet. An aviyal–sambar–sundal person was now a 45 g-protein, 100 g-green veggies, zero-sugar person. It was bound to go wrong.

Good health isn't just about HbA1c or any one parameter. It is also about standing on our two feet, laughing with our friends, sharing our meals, exchanging recipes, doing a smooth Ustrasana in a yoga class that erupts into a spontaneous applause. I mean, at seventy-five you are on borrowed time that much more than what you are when you are forty-five or thirty-five, so you must make the most of it, no?

But is there really a protein gap?

> **Protein gap**
>
> The misplaced notion that most populations, especially vegetarians, are deficient in protein.

The 'Politics of Protein' report by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food) has conclusively shown that there is no such thing as a 'global protein gap'. The only people who fall short on protein are the ones who fall below the poverty line, and this is because they do not have access to adequate food – at least no access to adequate nutritious food on all days. Now just turn that around. People simply need access to nutritious, real food to get their protein or the in-vogue nutrient of the decade.

Nor should you need to worry about protein insufficiency because you are a vegetarian. In India, a lot of those who suffer from poverty are likely to be meat eaters. And yet they fall short on protein. Because nutrient deficiencies, including those of protein, are not about whether you are a vegetarian, eggetarian, non-vegetarian, pescan, vegan, etc. – it's about whether you are poor.

I can safely say that if you bought and are reading this book, you are not poor. It's like the cliché: In the world that counts its carbs, calories and steps, be a rebel and count your blessings. If your plate is full, your protein intake is adequate. If you really care about protein, support the government

when it gets into welfare mode and wants to bring access to nutritious food for everyone.

And if you do want to be vigilant about your protein intake, then care about getting a diverse range of proteins on your plate – dals and legumes, nuts, dairy-based protein like milk and dahi, and fish, meat and eggs if you are a non-vegetarian.

In summary, *a shortage of protein doesn't exist, and surely doesn't exist in isolation.* The ones who are falling short of it are falling short of all nutritious things, including access to education, sanitation, dignity and income. So, removing carbs and consuming protein tries to fix what is not broken.

The politics of protein[4]

Released in April 2022, this is the most comprehensive report on protein till date, put together by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food). They look at the bigger picture of why there is such a hype for protein and point out the concentration of the meat and dairy business in a handful of companies globally (called 'big protein', who, incidentally, also have big investments in alternative protein start-ups). The report says that the exploding market for protein products is also driving the narrative of protein insufficiency. The panel's recommendation is simple but far reaching: There is no global protein gap except when people struggle with poverty,

and instead of a protein transition, we should drive a global transition towards sustainable food systems, a.k.a. local, seasonal and traditional.

You can read more at www.ipes-food.org

Protein – consumption vs assimilation

The key to protein assimilation is its digestibility. Consuming protein, its assimilation, and then the sparing of protein for growth, repair and maintenance are not quite the same thing. Currently, the narrative is entirely focused on consumption. And from weight loss to disease prevention, from good skin to longevity – it is the answer to everything. The reality, though, is very different.

When people get protein-consumption focused, they miss out on rice, poha, chapati, bhakri, to start with. Then, of course, they also miss out on fresh fruit – banana, mango, sitaphal *ka toh naam bhi lena allowed nahi hai*. And then, from pumpkin seeds to pistachios, everything is eaten just for protein. So it's chia seeds in the morning; eggs, avocado and cheese for breakfast; grilled chicken with salad or sautéed veggies for lunch; a protein shake thrown in; and meat, fish, egg or paneer for dinner. You expect to feel fab but you fart, unexpectedly. But don't worry, there's a cure for that too: fibre drinks, pills and powders.

And how can I forget the probiotic yogurt? The more unpronounceable the brand, the better it works. Every actor,

cricketer and creator worth their salt is now into products that are ready-to-eat and sell you health. Good business sense is about having a fat bottom line, and what better way to do it than to pitch it on a slim waist line? See, I have told you this, but I will tell you again: What's good for profits is often bad for people and the planet. In the nineties, actors and cricketers would squander their money, now they triple it with investments in food companies and do the ads for free.

And nothing wrong with that. I for one love money and so I am careful where I put it. So should you. Any weight loss (even if it comes) that comes at the cost of not eating simple, sensible *ghar ka khaana* is going to eat away at that muscle tissue that you are trying so hard to preserve. And losing muscle is never going to make you look thinner, only flabbier. And disproportionate, too. And no, exercise is not going to save or help you build more muscle if you are restricting home-cooked food and the seasonal staples fruits and veggies.

All that exercise will do then is cause exertion and injuries, not to mention gastric distress. And instead of figuring out where you are going wrong by watching what you eat, you are going to watch the internet and diagnose that your low energy and frequent injuries are being caused by low protein, so you are going to add some more to your diet. And then that consumption–exertion–injury–distress cycle is going to go on till frustration hits (because it always does), and then you are going to eat cake, cheat with a biryani or worse, get a pizza or pancakes.

Then you are going to feel guilty and go into repeat mode till your body finally not just refuses to budge on the weight but also seeks revenge by going up on body weight and HbA1c, breaking out into acne, etc. So, now you must smarten up and eat 'smart carbs', the friend, guide and philosopher will tell you. 'What's "smart carbs"?' I asked a client who was telling me this story. 'Oh, it's dals, legumes, grapefruit.' Then, over time, this too will not get you what you want but just ABC – acidity, bloating, constipation – and you will finally hang up your high-protein boots. Or at least that's my hope.

The food matrix

It refers to a food's physical structure, the way the molecules inside it interact, and how this interplay affects the way we digest and absorb nutrients.

When we eat food like it is available in nature, without tinkering with its nutrients, we stand to gain the most out of the goodness it offers. For example, the assimilation of protein from whole milk is better than low-fat milk, including low-fat milk with added amino acids. The lesser the processing, the better the access to nutrients.

Same with whole egg – it offers more nourishment than the whites of two eggs. And in the greed to get more protein and keeping the fat intake down, eating six egg whites really offers no benefit as compared to eating two eggs with toast, like the way you naturally would if you could put the protein mania aside.

Even post-workout protein assimilation to aid recovery peaks when protein comes with a combination of carbs. So, have that banana with your protein shake or have a paneer paratha or egg curry with rice. It would be better any day than just a protein shake post-workout.

Essentially, the food matrix just tells us what we already know – it's the full package and not the single nutrient that matters. The package of other essential nutrients, wholesome taste and ease of digestion is crucial in order to meet the body's protein requirements. You often use the word 'package' when talking about a job, you even use it to describe a great guy because a great guy is more than just good looks and a package is more than just salary.

'Horses for courses,' Ravi Shastri, arguably India's m successful coach, would have said. Every player who's made it to the squad is good, but some are better for certain pitches. Your body is a bit like that. If you just eat protein at the cost of not eating carbs or home-cooked food, it simply breaks down protein and uses it for energy purposes – basically it will use the molecule for all non-exclusive protein work too. Now that's just a waste of time, digestive enzymes and money. Also, protein doesn't have wings, so eat excess of it and it gets converted to fat, just like eating excess cake does. *Toh problem kya hai? Excess ka.* Once you get that, you get everything right in life.

Exercise and sleep

Alongside digestibility, we must consider two other critical aspects – exercise and sleep. Both are underrated but crucial for the assimilation of protein.

Exercise leads to the calibrated wear and tear of our muscle tissue, and the body needs this dose of breakdown to stimulate muscle protein synthesis (i.e., to build muscle). Consistency with exercise is the most crucial aspect of the assimilation of protein. Aim for a minimum dose of 150 minutes a week.

Sleep – without it, any amount of exercise or protein intake is pretty much useless. Sleep is when most, if not all, the repair work takes place.[5] If you are eating protein for better hormone production – growth hormone, insulin, testosterone, etc. – sleep becomes even more critical for you. Men need about seven to eight hours of sleep a day, and women can need up to nine hours around hormonal milestones.

What about protein shakes?

Yes, a protein shake is fine, but the problem often is that the protein shake, in the absence of a wholesome diet, is just not effective. And exercise will then only lead to exhaustion, injuries and frequent illnesses. You can just skip the protein shake if it doesn't sit well in your stomach and have a wholesome meal instead (within thirty minutes of working out).

Context matters the most

I have many problems with the protein narrative, but easily the biggest one is that it is far removed from our cultural context. Context *kya hai bhai*? The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), in its latest dietary guidelines, lays emphasis on healthy diets as those diets that are formulated according to personal preferences, cultural traditions and are within budgetary means. That is what context means. Kirti's is a case in point, but hers isn't the only one.

I recently came across a tweet from a health influencer who routinely warns people not to believe advice on social media, sharing his advice for how vegetarians should get th protein, especially if they are pregnant.

Against every item, he had written the grams of protein. I will spare you the details, but I will tell you the list. It started with Greek yoghurt, went on to peanut butter, quinoa and pumpkin seeds, and ended with tempeh, edamame, etc. I mean, *aaj tak apni aabadi bina yeh kuchh khaye kaise badh rahi hai*? But jokes apart, imagine a pregnant girl who is barely able to tolerate the sight, smell and thought of food, who is trying to get a grip on her digestion and struggling to sleep, trying to ingest these? Yes, food tweets bring better traction, but do you notice the lack of home-food options on that list?

And where does the truth really lie? That dry fruit that your mother, aunt, mother-in-law or older friend goads you to eat; the ragi or besan laddoo that your neighbour lovingly

sends; the sensitivity that your friends show in not smoking in front of you or going out for dinner early now that you are pregnant, are all that one needs. A few extra calories (nutritious, of course, *chadho mat mere pe*) and a little TLC make all the difference.

The lawyer who was made of steel

A client of mine was a successful lawyer – a partner at her firm. Not too many women last that long. But she was made of steel, of nerves, wit and diligence. Every year she would do a routine blood test. No one had ordered them, it was just diligence on her part. Her numbers were all in range, and all the t's had been crossed and i's dotted.

Then, for a year after she turned forty, she went on the usual protein diet. She ate more protein than ever and lifted weights. This time she expected to see even better reports, but to her dismay that was not the case.

She told Jinal from my team that she had come with one agenda – to figure out what was going wrong with her. She had a job, a little son, an ailing mother, a husband with a fancy job, a trainer, a Vedanta class, volunteering work at a blind school (part-time two days a month). She had a cook, a nanny and a nurse, but things weren't right. 'I am crashing, or at least that is how I feel. I always do an annual blood report, and that's when I saw that my protein levels were really low.'

'When my doctor saw it, he said look, this explains the constant low energy. Just eat more protein. But if I do that,

then I have to just quit my job and eat protein full time. Because just look at my eating sheet (referring to her three-day diet recall). I only eat protein. I am already eating 120 g, do I up it to 150–170 g?' That's also how she had lost weight. But the main thing was that she felt tired. Very tired. All the time. And she was tired of feeling tired.

'Have you also cut out all carbs?' Jinal asked.

'Obviously,' she replied.

'Ok, let's add them back.'

So, we had her eat a toast with her two eggs. Which kind of toast? 'Anything you prefer,' said Jinal. We asked her to add rice with her dal. What kind of rice? 'Anything you prefer.' Add a sabzi too. Any one that's fresh from the local sabzi walla. We scaled back on the shakes, just kept the post-workout one and then added a ragi laddoo for an evening snack (handy and quick, can be eaten in a rick or taxi) and post-workout roti–sabzi or rice–chicken for dinner, and also added a glass of milk before bedtime.

And the report, energy and mood improved. She was happy that her son picked up the ragi laddoo habit and her mother that of haldi milk at night. 'But most importantly,' she told Jinal, 'I no longer snap at my son and have the patience to listen to my mom tell the same story on repeat. I feel less guilty now. Can eating right do that?'

It's not magic, it's chemistry. Maybe it's biochemistry. Maybe it's nothing but the body's way to survive. When you are mindful of what you eat, being mindful of not consuming excess calories, and then get on the protein bandwagon, you

begin to fall short of your daily calories. When that happens, not only do you sub-optimally use the protein you eat (break it down) but your body also begins to waste or break down the muscle tissue that it currently holds. Muscle is an expensive tissue to keep. And if there's going to be a food shortage, the body is trained to get rid of muscle and prioritize survival.

Like all women, my client had to juggle multiple roles and work. So just because she turned forty nothing terrible was going to happen to her. The same old things would continue, but now she had to just be kinder to herself, not go on a punishing diet. So, ya, don't stop that dahi–rice, banana, roti–sabzi – regular home-cooked food, really. Because they are like that soft breeze, tender gaze and mature love that you are missing in your life.

So, how much protein do you really need?

Well, you should know the answer to this by now. Just the routine, home-cooked meals that are diverse, timely, and the ones where you are not overthinking protein, more than get you the grams of protein per kg of body weight that you need. The amount of protein for optimum functioning of the body is quite low, actually, unlike the narrative. Most of the global health organizations and national dietary guidelines, including those of the USA, Canada, the UK, India, etc., recommend a protein intake of between 0.8 g to 1 g per kg of body weight. So for a 60 kg person like me, it's about 48 to 60 g a day.

So if I had breakfast, lunch, dinner and an evening snack and ensured that I am not undereating, I would meet my protein requirements without having to 'up' my protein with a shake or seeds or anything that I am not familiar with. So honestly, we are not short on protein, but we are short on:

- confidence, because we second-guess quantities at every meal and hence fall short on protein.
- vision, because we get protein-focused and stand to lose out on fibre, vitamins, minerals, taste and ease of digestion that regular meals offer.
- adequate exercise and activity, as we spend too much time scrolling on reels that tell us repeatedly that we are falling short of protein and offer expensive solutions like tempeh, tofu, quinoa, etc.
- sleep, again, as we are scrolling reels
- eating home-cooked meals and excessive on junk takeout, alcohol and vape – all the stuff that leeches protein out of your body but you won't pay attention to.

So, sorry, but you are short on courage to eat normally. We will discuss this more in detail when we are talking about food combinations and proportions, but for now, here is a quick summary of what not to do to meet your protein requirements:

- Do not need to go out of your traditional practices of food. For example, moving from being a vegetarian to non-vegetarian or eggetarian, etc.

- Do not need to go out of regional practices of food also. For example, inclusion of sattu or makhana. You can do it to share heritage but not as a source of protein.
- Do not need to eat international sources of protein either – edamame or peanut butter or Greek yogurt. When you do, do it for a change, not for protein.
- Do not alter time-tested proportions of food. For example, increasing urad dal in idli prep or moong dal in khichdi.

And a few things to keep in mind

- If you want to switch to being vegan, know that it's much more complicated than the narrative of cruelty or greenhouse gas emissions. It depends on the region of the world you live in, the community/population you belong to, the food systems prevalent in your region, and much more. You must make an informed decision.
- If you are a non-vegetarian, you can continue eating the kind of meat you have traditionally eaten. But follow the time-tested food practices of eating meat a few times a week and as part of a complete meal.
- And finally, at the policy level, the government needs to focus on poverty reduction and food access, and not get distracted by the protein narrative.

Devil's advocate

But what if I am upping my protein more carefully. So instead of two to three rotis and my protein and vegetables, I now eat only one roti and put more protein and vegetables on my plate. Is that a problem?

The one-line answer to this is – you cannot fix what is not broken. You don't need to add any nutrient to your plate carefully, you must just be careful that you are not tinkering the time-tested combinations at the cost of falling short on fibre, magnesium, Vitamin B, and so on. All these are found in grains, millets and legumes; and most 'careful' additions of protein mean deleting these in order to add protein, and the taking supplements to balance all that you carelessly dele from your food plate.

The thing is that we have made the simple pleasures of life like food extremely complicated. Most often, being on a diet means eating much less than what you would like to because you don't want to consume too many calories. Or it would mean eating in a manner where you are, for example, subtracting the second roti or helping of rice you need, to add an egg or a bowl of paneer or tofu because you want to add more protein.

Or you eat too much of a sabzi or salad in the hope of keeping your overall intake low and your satiety high. You may think that all these are very intelligent strategies, or you

may have seen some well-made reels where rice is replaced with some source of protein but what you don't see or know is that nutrition science is now recognizing this phenomenon as **BED – binge-eating disorder.**

Binge-eating disorder is different from the usually diagnosed ones like anorexia or bulimia. But it is an eating disorder, nevertheless. It is an unhealthy obsession with looking a certain way and punishing yourself for not looking hot/reel-worthy/at least 2 kg skinnier. In the age of social media, most girls seem to be on its spectrum (Australia has recently banned social media for teenagers because of the harmful effects it has on their health and confidence). And the tendency is to under-eat at meal times, only to binge late at night or at random times. Net-net, you are not just out of shape but out of self-esteem, too. Instead, sit, chew every bite, engage with food with all your senses, slow down, and repeat the whole exercise. And I promise you that you will not be looking for chocolate, chips or ice cream ever in your life. You may still eat them but only out of a decision and not desperation.

You don't know how liberating that's gonna feel.

2. Playing with calories – intermittent fasting/ skipping meals

'Will you talk to my brother? He's one of India's top cardiologists and he cannot believe that I am eating and losing,' my client asked me one day.

'Sure, I will.'

My thumb rule is that the answer to the question 'Will you talk to my brother, mother, sister, wife' is always yes. My clients may have to go through a waiting period before their program starts, but their family will not wait. Family comes first is a rule I like to live by. So, the cardio brother could talk only on a Sunday, and only at 4 p.m., but '*chalega chalega*, no problem'.

'All right, so my sister can't stop talking about you and insisted that I speak to you,' said Dr Sai Satish from the oth[illegible] side. *Bhai koi bhi ho*, they will always act like they are d[illegible] their sisters a huge favour.

'Hope good things,' I said, the usual thing to say in these circumstances.

'Oh yeah, but I am already doing IF and I have never felt more energetic, I eat at 2 p.m. and then 8 p.m. So I am going to do this until the end of the year, lose all the weight and then in Jan I will join your program.'

We were talking sometime in October or November. 'Sure, look forward to connecting then,' I said and we hung up.

He called me back the next day.

'Hey, why didn't you say anything to me after I told you that I am doing IF?'

'Nothing,' I said.

'Come on,' he said.

'Seriously, nothing.'

'No, you didn't say what you were thinking. What were you thinking?'

First of all, men don't listen, and if they are doctors they listen even less, and if they are cardiologists, at the top of the chain, they only talk. This one had heard my silence. Bloody impressive. So I opened up and said, 'I was just thinking that if I was ever on your table, I would want my surgery to be scheduled at 4 p.m.' He couldn't stop laughing at the other end.

'Wow, I like you, how soon can we start?'

The sweet middle

The problem in today's world is that we seem to have lost the measure of how much to do. We swing between the extremes of too much and too little, without even once hitting that *Suvarna madhyam*, the sweet middle. Take the case of skipping meals in the hope of eating lesser calories. In the good old times, people skipped dinner. I mean about twenty to twenty-five years ago. That's when I started working and almost everyone I spoke to or worked with, ate soup and salad for dinner because they considered that light. Then they binged in the middle of the night, stayed fat and looked for a dietitian to help them.

That's how I entered the picture. Me saying, 'eat dal–chawal for dinner as a light meal', almost earned me the reputation of being a revolutionary. My clients ate their dal–chawal (I mean, anything to lose weight, ya), didn't feel like bingeing in the night and, lo and behold, lost weight.

Twenty to twenty-five years ago seems like a long time because social media has meant that everything is at a fast forward pace. But the problems of extremes remains unchanged, just as the problem of replacing something good with something poor. If dinner was the villain then, the new villain is breakfast. Now everyone wants to skip breakfast and go straight to lunch at 2 p.m. If dal–chawal was replaced by soup and salad back then, now it's the likes of poha or paratha being replaced by tall black coffees and even a cigarette to go with it.

While there is no doubt that eating packaged cereals, tetra pack juices, jams and spreads is unhealthy, skipping breakfast altogether or just having a coffee instead is a poor deal. I would think this is common sense, but we are living in a world where sciency and spiritualism go hand in hand. Not just the influencer, today even your guru wants you to skip breakfast. Maybe both want you to have your coffee with a shot of ghee. Maybe not. Maybe the doctor is telling you that ghee is trans fat, the guru is telling you it's A2 ghee and cows listen to bhajans daily so it's all good vibes, but all you have now is bad confusion.

The sweet middle here would mean a return to homemade *nashta* instead of packaged cereals. But then, everyone is saying 'skip breakfast/do IF'. Then first check the definition

of 'everyone'. Does it translate to health and food influencers with verified handles who land on your timeline? Because everyone is saying other things – your mother is goading you to at least have almonds before leaving home, your daughter is rolling her eyes when you pick up coffee while dropping her off to school and your secretary is now scheduling all your important meetings only after lunch since your temper is flying.

Like mother, like son

A client of mine wanted her fourteen-year-old son to sign up with me.

'Please just check on him, he's terrible with food.'

'Arre, don't worry about him,' I said. 'They are just badly behaved with their mothers but are absolutely ok otherwise.'

'No, no, he's well behaved,' she assured me. 'But *bohot foodie hai*.'

'Oh, don't worry, he will stop making demands,' I said.

'That's the thing,' she clapped her hands in frustration and said. 'He doesn't demand anything. He's fasting. He wakes up and leaves for school without eating anything. On the way to school, he picks up a Starbucks coffee, then he skips the small recess break and only has lunch at 2 p.m. during the big break. But from 11 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., he's unable to focus in class. I even have a calendar note from school.

'In the evening, if we are having anything made at home, he won't have it. And we are social people, we have a ton of parties at home but my boy won't touch a thing. *Maa hu mein*,' she said emotionally. 'I know he wants to eat. But he deprives himself, and then come the weekend, there's no stopping his eating and bingeing.'

We have had a generation of forty- to fifty-year-old mommies who have been dieting all through their youth, not knowing that seeking to be thinner at any cost is a contagious disease. When your kids do the nastier, dirtier version of what you did to yourself in your twenties, *toh tum se dekha nahi jaata hai*? When I was growing up, I wanted a better world for women – equality, really. The only place where we have truly achieved it now is that some (not all) boys are as insecure about their looks as young girls.

Knowledge vs information

A doctor recently tweeted that fasting for seventy-two hours kills tumour cells. It went viral, every influencer worth his salt adding their two cents to it – 'The solution to kill cancer is so simple but people lack the "will" or "discipline" to do it.' Or the good old conspiracy theories of how pharma wants to keep you sick for profit or a culture-spin on how ancient cultures have always fasted, etc.

And then Dr Pramesh, who is the director of Tata

Memorial Hospital (TMC Mumbai) and the convenor of National Cancer Grid, which is trying to make cancer care accessible and affordable to all, replied, 'No, it doesn't,' only to receive a healthy dose of backlash.

'What do you know? This person is a doctor, who are you?' asked one user. Dr Pramesh's handle doesn't have a 'doctor' in it; it says @cspramesh. *Username mein doctor nahi, toh tum doctor nahi.*

The thing with knowledge is that the more you know, the less sure you are about what you know and the more you want to learn. And the thing with information is that it gives you the confidence of being well informed, and now you want to teach others.

The fact is that, in India, the incidence of cancer cases are estimated to increase to 2.09 million in 2040 as compared to 1.32 million in 2020, and the number of new patients at Tata Memorial Centres are now 1.28 lakh, an increase of 16 per cent from last year. When you watch all this as a part of your daily life, you know that people are willing to go to any extent to cure themselves, including selling their homes, pulling their children out of school, living on footpaths … all to have access to treatment. And even with proven standard care, which includes multiple interventions like medicines, surgery, etc., the cure or remission rate is dependent on so many factors like age, stage, co-morbidities.

In any case, loss of appetite, aversion to food and nausea are some of the most common side effects of the treatment, and none of them makes you stronger. It just makes it harder

for you and for the caregiver, but people brave it. So, if a single intervention had the efficacy, everyone would jump on that bandwagon. But sadly, going without food, whether it's for seventy-two or whatever number of hours, is just not a useful tool for curing cancer. Just like going without food for sixteen or whatever hours is not a useful tool for weight loss.

Hunger

Ending hunger is one of the first sustainable development goals that the world has agreed on, and in our country no one should have any misconceptions about what going without food for long hours can do. Other than the fact that it can prematurely kill you, it also increases school dropout rates, crime rates, disease rate, you name it, and only everything terrible is linked with it. And no amount of science or spirituality can put a positive spin to it.

Arif's confusion

Arif was a pulmonologist based in the US. He had three hard years at work during Covid. Now, with a bad stomach, poor fitness and weight gain, he had signed up for our program.

'I have read all your books,' he told me.

'How sweet,' I said.

'Now I am reading this,' he showed me another book on food. 'I read a lot.'

'Nice,' I said with my mouth and 'not so nice' in my mind.

'So, I wanted to ask,' he said, 'What's your take on IF? Because I have been on IF, low carb, high protein, it worked (roll your r's as you read that), but the weight bounces back, you know.'

Now, when you are talking to docs, you have to throw some jargon around, especially the first time around. So, I said, 'See, all these diets, they work till they don't. And in terms of studies, you have data that compares low carb to low fat, to IF, and none is better than the other. They just "work" because it helps reduce calories, that's the main mechanism. Also, now there's a study to show that people who routinely skip breakfast have a higher risk of certain gastro-intestinal cancers.[6] The trade-off is often not worth it.'

The poor guy had signed up for weight loss but was also facing indigestion, constipation, IBS-like symptoms and, to top it all, poor sleep. If I was at a talk, I would have said, '*If a diet has a name, it's bound to fail*,' but in a one on one, you have to explain a bit.

'Hmm,' he said.

'I will send you the link to the study,' I said. Something we have started doing of late. Some of our clients like to see, read stuff, or at least they pretend to.

Chhattees ka aakda

Mumbai has the best lingo on earth. One such way is to describe a relationship with a person as '*apun ka chhattees ka aakda hai*'. The person that you just cannot get along with is the person with whom you have *chhattees ka aakda* (number). In arranged marriages when *kundalis* are compared, if the 36 *gunas* match, then it's supposed to be a match made in heaven. Perfect on paper. But in lived experience, it's these couples that don't seem to get along at all, and so *chhattees ka aakda* is a euphemism for a strained relationship. Nothing wrong on paper, but *jamta nahi hai*. Because love isn't a calculation of risks and benefits, it is a meeting of hearts. When you marry people who have nothing in common but kundalis have a perfect score, you have set a disaster rolling. Remember this the next time you are reading some sciency stuff: just because it looks great on paper, it doesn't mean anything. A match made in heaven is put to test on earth. Similarly, a study under lab conditions will be actually tested in real life.

Why fasting doesn't work

Ok, here it is. All the reasons why fasting doesn't work:

1. The proof is in the physiology. And the physiology doesn't care whether it's a weekend or a weekday. All it cares for is that it allows you to live long, however sub-

optimally. So, when you go without food for long time periods – fourteen to sixteen hours – your body responds by lowering your energy output (baseline reset, which we will discuss in detail later). You get through your daily life and even your intense workouts with your body being on 'energy-save mode'. The only weight you lose is coming dominantly from your fat-free mass, muscles especially. So you are lighter on the scale and heavier on your feet. Feel me?

Also, bear in mind that physiology is not polite or kind to your weight-loss goals. Autophagy, a term often used to promote IF, is the body's mechanism to get efficient when resources are low. It doesn't love this. And ketones are a limited fuel, so they can let you do a light workout max. Anything intense and your body won't tolerate it, often leading to injuries. Maybe that's the reason why most fasting ads use just a walking model who keeps getting skinnier. This is also why OMAD (only one meal a day) plans will ask you to just do light walking max. Remember, youth and longevity are all about muscle strength and bone density, not skinny.

2. The proof is in the science. There is literally no conclusive evidence to show that fasting improves insulin sensitivity. Remember repeatability and reproducibility? In fact, eating only within a restricted feeding window means that people eat a lot more at one time or within that window than what they typically would, and that increases postprandial triglycerides. That's a big word for 'fat'. It can

therefore increase insulin resistance, the exact opposite of what you were hoping for. And when it comes to insulin sensitivity or heart health, exercise has actually proved to be an excellent intervention.

3. The proof is in the culture. I mean, exactly which fast was meant to take place all day, all night or all week with a two-day break? 5:2, or whatever? A fast where there is no restriction on alcohol and cigarettes, where there is no call to reflect on the impermanence of the body? This is not upavaas, it's bakwaas. The whole point of a traditional fast is that it is a time-bound practice where you celebrate community and diversity of food produce. Remove that and you just have a method of deprivation dressed up as a culture doll (more details under 'Fasting' in the chapter on cultural appropriation.)
4. The proof is in the lived experience. People who have been on a prolonged fasting, lose their sense of when to stop eating. This is the most common thing that my clients who were fasting would tell me – that they felt full and dull, no matter how little they would eat in the feeding window, and had no sense of satiety even if they ate a ton of food. It's a paradox that's hard to deal with in real time. For people who have always had a messed-up relationship with food, this becomes even more challenging. So, for all those who have been chubby, fat kids and teenagers, this just makes their body-image issues worse.
5. The proof is in the potty. The long hours of fasting, fourteen to sixteen, sometimes even twenty, often mean

more acidity, bloating and constipation. The excessive use of laxatives that fasting often requires can lead to a cycle of constipation and diarrhea (causing a loss of potassium that is linked to many complications, from poor digestion to excessive urination in the night, and in some rare cases, sudden heart failure also). Actually, there is no joy in lengthening your life span if you cannot have smooth, predictable bowel movements.

6. The proof is in the periods. The most common complaint with fasting among women, even for as little as a couple of months, is a messed-up cycle. One of the reasons is that in a limited eating window, you tend to not just eat larger meals but the diversity in your meals also takes a hit. And that can lead to poor micronutrient assimilation, especially that of iron, calcium, magnesium, and of vitamins like B12. This can lead to missed periods in young girls, scanty periods for those in their thirties and heavy flow for those around peri-menopause and menopause. It also makes hormonal headaches and migraines worse. Women, especially the young and fertile, as also those who are already pregnant or lactating, best stay away from IF.

Devil's advocate

But my trainer is looking amazing on IF. And why has my friend not complained of any symptoms?

The trainer is twenty-something, you are forty or older. If you look at your picture as a twenty-year-old, you were fairly skinny too. And athletic. Then you go down a path where there is an articleship in a CA's office or you study for some competitive exam, so you sit around a lot more than what you should for your average age. Then, at forty or sixty, you look different from those whose professions kept them on their toes in their twenties and thirties – the trainers, the actors, the dancers, etc. You can't grudge them that. And you cannot forget that the main role of food and even exercise is to make you better at what you do. And not to keep you in 'shape', but to keep you in good health. Happy and in harmony with the life you have built for yourself.

Also, just because your trainer or dietitian or whoever tells you something very confidently, don't believe it. Deep conviction in flawed beliefs is one of the signs of youth, just like good skin, smooth periods and bad boyfriends.

I went on a solo trek and my guide was a young twenty-year-old. He could rap, tell stories and make me laugh. Then he got comfortable enough to tell me his philosophy of life, 'Ma'am, if you do good, only good things happen to you. And if you do bad, bad things happen – if not today, then tomorrow.' For a moment I thought I should tell him that's not how life works. Bad things happen to perfectly good

people all the time. And many wonderful things happen to terrible people too.

My grandfather used to say, every time he wanted us to know that his word is final, that he hadn't dyed his hair in the sun. To say that his greys was a sign of the life he had lived, and that his lived experiences gave him an edge over all that any one of us could possibly know through books, beliefs or theories.

I didn't say anything to my guide either. My hair too has earned its streaks of grey. I know that some things are best learnt by living, not by telling. Unfortunately, female clients (no matter how smart) tend to listen to everything that their male trainers tell them. We like being obedient, easy to work with, we seek approval, etc. It's a conditioning that all of us must question in good time.

But till then, we all must have one person in our lives with whom we have a non-transactional relationship (one you don't pay to be your trainer, dietitian or doctor), who's someone we know in real life (not someone we know from social media who answers our queries, likes our comments or retweets our replies), who's not our AI guide (who talks to us from a gadget) – someone in flesh and blood who has a *dil-se-dil ka rishta* with us.

It could be your mentor, neighbour, grandmother . . . anyone at all. And if this person feels that we are doing something extreme with our diets (even when we are loving the results and feeling on top of the world), then we should be ready to stop it. No questions asked. Stop the diet, not end the relationship.

In Marathi, the term for this is *'aapla manoos'*, which means *apna aadmi*, or 'main man', like they call it in the internet lingo, someone you can ask anything of, someone who will always be there for you, someone who makes you feel like you scored a 100 when you got out for a duck. Someone who can see your greatness before the world can see it and protects you from your own flaws and shortcomings. People who are invested in us can tell that something is going wrong even when we can't, and sometimes even when we think it's going great.

Broken window

In criminology, there's something called the 'broken window theory'. If a building has a broken window that has gone unrepaired for a long time, then it can become a breeding ground for serious crime over a period of time because it's a sign of neglect and that no one is in charge. People who have the connect with us that I have talked about can tell us that something is broken (small, but going unrepaired) even when no signs are present, either visibly or in blood reports. The broken-window approach is important. You get big things done by addressing the small stuff in a timely and effective manner. Small crimes, or small doubts about whether you are eating too much, or small needs such as wanting to fit into a smaller dress size, can lead to something more dangerous in the long run if not addressed right away.

Baseline reset

A mental and physiological adjustment to poorer day-to-day health that sets in over a period of time. Sub-optimal health becomes the new normal.

Dr Abhay, a famous haematologist, once told me about a case of a thirty-something woman he saw whose Hb was 3.4, and she had taken the train from Dahisar to his clinic in Bandra.

'How do they manage,' I asked?

'Oh, you will be surprised how the body adapts. I jumped out of my chair,' he said, 'but the woman said to me, "Doctor relax, *mi theek aahe*." If the drop is over a period of time, everything slows down and adapts to a lower level. Only if the drop is sudden, like an accident, do you crash. But if it's happening over many months or years, you are unfortunately fine.'

'Scary, but that's how resilient the human body is,' he concluded.

And if you are a woman, you need this *aapla manoos* even more. Because our baseline, when it comes to accepting poor outcomes with health, energy, sleep, etc., begins to shift at such a slow, steady speed that we can't keep pace. We continue living our lives, neglecting ourselves, and whipping ourselves into shape seems to be the only saving grace. But someone who knows us, cares for us, is able to spot the shift. It's just critical that we know them too, see them and hear them.

Here's another thing that I will tell you with the grey streaks in my hair and lines on my face. The fact is that every

diet works. If 'works' is about getting you to fit into a smaller size of dress, lose weight and have some sense of achievement because of that. The question always is, at what cost?

3. Playing with single ingredients – sugar, dairy, gluten, etc.

'I don't touch sugar' is another flex, very common among the young these days. They are convinced that sugar is addictive and that it increases inflammation in our body and feeds cancer cells, or some such stuff. 'I am off sugar, salt, dairy and gluten' is the usual cocktail party refrain.

'Sugar makes the brain feel like it's on cocaine', she told me. She was a young, beautiful, rich brat engaged to one of my clients. She had refused kokum sherbet in my office because she was off sugar and was on her second cup of black coffee, impressed that our beans were single origin. 'Not bad haan, for aunty', she said to Pranay, whom I have worked with since he was a teenager and who is now in his mid-twenties.

He doesn't call me aunty, he calls me RD, but she called me aunty. *Arree itna pyar hai mujhse toh kokum pee*, but she was on a 'ccc' – caffeine, chocolate, constipation – diet. I was trying to make conversation, but it was getting difficult. She informed me that weed was therapeutic, Goyard was the new LV and that dark chocolate had more antioxidants than red wine. '*Aur koi mila nai kya*,' I wanted to ask my boy. My shrinking ovaries, bitter heart and old age were making it hard for me to hide my disappointment.

Swamiji of Parmarth Ashram in Rishikesh told me life is 'not fight or flight, it's fight or fine'. Some women cannot tolerate a word of nonsense after forty. Others, like me, develop an appetite for it. But I have had constant training

really, my profession *mein kuchh karne* – or more importantly *karwane ke liye – bohot pyar se sab sun na padta hai.* That's my training ground, that's where you get the pulse of where and how far this will go, of the inclusions and exclusions to make in the diet plan. You learn that for long-term health you don't need to convert, you simply need to educate, advocate, regulate. That's when there is ownership, and therein lies success.

She continued, 'I was just telling Pranay that all I need from you is some advice to get sausage-like poop. And the PCO influencer I follow is recommending cocoa-sugar for good gut bacteria, because the bacteria in the brain is same as that in the gut. On most days I am like – take the protein, take the fat, take the fibre – because I honestly can't complicate life with food, etc. I am like eat to live, and not like Pranay's family who are forever discussing food. *Breakfast pe lunch k discussion.* It's too much. I am like Virat Kohli, I don't about taste.'

It was a *shola-tha-jal-bujha-hoon* kind of moment. 'So anything you tell me', she reassured me, 'I can do.' This wasn't a diet meeting, it was a meet-my-girlfriend meeting.

'I only have two problems – sausage-like poop and how to manage sugar cravings during PMS.'

'Ah! ok,' I said. 'Send me your three-day recall, I will look at it and make recommendations if I have any.'

The three-day recall is my saviour. I ask people to write that and most times I never have to hear from them again. In the rare instances that we do, we tell them what to do, and

it always works. Telling people what to do must be rooted in their lives, their reality, or else you are just an #influencer and not a true-blue consultant (telling you what you already know for a fee :-)).

Box of sweets

Dr Joshi worked at Tata Memorial Hospital and, like all humans, wanted to lose weight. Seeing about forty to sixty patients a day was her regular routine, leaving her with little time and, more importantly, little bandwidth for anything else, be it planning meals or exercise. Weekends were dedicated to studying, writing, presenting and speaking at conferences, etc. One day, out of frustration, she decided that she was going to put up a notice in her OPD – 'Do NOT bring sweets for the doctor.' But her *mavshi* (assisting nurse) put her foot down. 'You can't do that,' she said. 'You don't have to eat all the sweets, just eat half a piece. We will send the rest to the children's ward, there are many other places where we can distribute sweets. It is the easiest and sweetest way for your patients to express gratitude after getting better. We can't take that joy away from them.' Great institutions are built on team work, where people are free to offer and take good advice without the hassle of hierarchy.

It's about context again

The thing is that when you cut out single ingredients based purely on their nutritional profile, it lands up being a massive misstep on your path to good health. Cutting out ghee for being a trans fat, cutting out sugar for being sugar, cutting out wheat for gluten, or cutting out rice for starch. The sensible thing to do is to always put them in context.

So, if we are to banish foods based on a single ingredient, we must check a few things: Is the study based on sugar in sherbet or on the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages like colas or juices? How does this nutrient come into play in my specific cuisine? Has it always been part of my culture, like sugar in the dahi that my grandma gave as a blessing before big board exams or my first travel abroad? Is it in sync with the climate of where I live? Like a dahi–rice to cool me down or the sugar and salt in my nimbu sherbet to hydrate myself on a sports day?

Should I skip dairy?

- Not if it has been part of your cultural and regional food system.
- If you are intolerant or don't like milk and milk products, it's ok to not have them.
- But don't shift to 'alternatives' like almond or soy milk to make up for lost nutrients.

- A diverse diet will more than take care of the absence of dairy in your diet.
- Avoid industrial milk, support small farmers and cooperatives.

Essentially, when you cut stuff out of your day, and therefore life, you cut your connect with culture, cuisine and climate. Giving up sherbet because of a study on sugar-sweetened beverages is a big leap of faith. It's a big price to pay even if you are thin at the end of it. A simple way out of this confusion is to say the name of the said ingredient/nutrient/current villain in your native language. *Chini, sakhar, shaker, tumhare muh mein ghee shakkar.*

Nama smaran is a powerful tool even in spirituality, because it has the power to knock common sense back into your life. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Isai – everyone is into *japa mala* or beads or the rosary. Just take the familiar, friendly name of a food and know that you are safe. This is also why language is important when it comes to health, and when language is lost, cuisine and connect to community and culture are also lost. Enriched with hashtags, we then begin to lead impoverished lives.

Villainizing a single ingredient is like cutting a tree down to expand a road. You didn't just knock a tree down, you knocked down a home to butterflies, bees and birds. You knocked down shade to the migrant worker, the sight of a flower to a lover, the familiar sight to the ageing brain which

could direct her home. And all you probably achieved was parking space for a car when you were actually hoping to make traffic move fast. Maybe you should just settle for cars moving at 30 kmph or less and make room for the public to walk, and root for better mass transport instead.

Ease of life

I had a client once tell me that he ran a few tests, saliva swabs and all the high-funda stuff and discovered that he was not allergic but intolerant to gluten. First of all, I don't have even *one* rupee *ka* faith in these tests, but that rant is for another book. He was of course wanting to lose weight so he went off rotis and ate only kuttu rotis. '2 p.m. to 8 p.m., my diet is clean.' Yeah, clean eating is a thing. Just like not eating before 2 p.m. is. 'Then post 11 p.m., I just get too many cravings. But I try to eat clean only, so I eat a packet of digestive biscuits, and for salt some makhana and kabhi if I feel like having a sweet, I squeeze all the syrup out and eat a rasgulla.'

'*Digestive ka gluten* you are not intolerant to?' I asked.

'Shit!' he said. '*Kya pakda!*' He got up and shook my hand. I wanted to weep, though.

Fully functional people doing random things – oh, the grip the food and weight-loss industry has, even over the geniuses, is quite something. This guy had built a factory from scratch, and at fifty-eight he now had over 6,000

employees. Building an empire from nothing is an act of determination, drive and discipline, but it comes at the cost of neglecting one's health. It shouldn't, but it does. You wait in people's offices endlessly, you do your own paperwork tirelessly, you walk 17-20 km in a day when you run out of bus fare. The trials and tribulations are endless.

The whole ease of business only starts after a certain set point, but till that time it's all uphill. At least it has been for this generation. Their children can now aspire to leave the office at 5 p.m., play tennis and have a life – not that this includes eating right, but again that's for another book ;-). First-generation entrepreneurs always have it rough; their wealth costs them their waistline. And it's not because they are greedy people who don't know when to stop eating or lack the will or desire for good health; it's the twenty-odd years of negligence or other priorities that take a toll. Their success nevertheless must be celebrated. **Hustling is hard on the health**, and the only sustainable approach now is to nurture the body back into good shape.

Devil's advocate

But then why do some people feel better after going #dairyfree or #glutenfree?

'Everyone is gluten and dairy free these days, kya?' asked one of my clients. Rochelle was a free-spirited young girl, making her career in Canada. She was an East Indian from Vasai and she loved the fact that my roots are in Vasai too and that our ancestral home is at Parnaka. 'Then you know my fav food,' she said. 'Bhujing chicken,' I replied. 'Yes!' she exclaimed. 'And the second one is?' 'Chaha,' I guessed right again. This mtg was already going well.

'If I get my fully loaded chaha (sugar and milk and tea leaves boiled to death), then the rest of the day, I am happy to not eat anything at all. But on shifting to Canada, I have noticed that I have gotten dairy intolerant. Full day I am burping, in dresses my stomach is showing, the other day my mom asked me on video call, what happened to your skin? Full break outs I have. Must be dairy only I figured. But then chai without milk I cannot imagine and with soy, almond milk toh it stinks, so now what to do?' She asked.

Dr Gursimran, one of my clients, is a gastroenterologist based in Pittsburgh, and an alumnus of Cleveland Clinic. During an Insta LIVE with me on IBS, he spoke about how kids who get a bad stomach during exams get a bad rep. *'Haan, kuch nahi, bas natak hai,'* because after exams their stomachs are just fine and they are playing and all. 'But what

we don't realize is that they are not pretending, the stress can affect digestion, cause pain, gas, bloating, nausea. And once that stress is over, your digestion returns to normal. We must also ask why every kid across the globe says, stomach is hurting and not head or hand? Because that's what actually hurts.'

Was Rochelle stressed? Yes. Not every girl has relationship stress. But the stress of making it on foreign soil in an era of economic instability and war, is real. As is not having the luxury of a fully functioning kitchen. Long meal gaps, eating the same batch of food for ten days, eating out of boredom, not to forget, eating nothing and starting the day with chai. Sometimes, all you need is a life that is free of repetitive errors. So, we added a date on waking up, fixed the long gaps with a fruit or nuts that she would carry in her bag, got her to cook fresh twice in a week, and planned for meals out so that they were not last-minute boredom decisions. And voila, the stomach no longer bloated with the cup of chai. Sometimes, it's the little things you do – the timing, the negligence, the phase of life and not necessarily the dairy. Or gluten for that matter.

But then why do some people actually feel better after going #dairyfree or #glutenfree? Because the "nocebo effect" is real. You may experience negative effects of an inert substance just because you are expecting to feel worse. So, the thing to do, as usual, is to do the first things first. Check on the basics – eating on time? Exercising

too much or nothing? Sleeping too late? And work on fixing those first. Because going #glutenfree #dairyfree will not resolve the problems that these bring. And over time, you may have to bring in many more #free to your life. Eventually, your diet gets so restricted that instead of tackling stresses of youth better, you feel overwhelmed by them.

But if you do address the underlying issues first, there is a good chance that your tolerance will improve, if not immediately, then over time. Having said that, in rare cases the intolerance to these substances is real, in which case simply avoid them. You don't have to replace these single ingredients with alternatives though.

2

Pseudo-cultural trends

Cultural appropriation

My client whatsapped me a news clip that read 'Mantralaya to serve kokum juice to all visitors', and captioned it '*tera jalwa*'. This is my advertising client who believes that by not being smart about endorsements (i.e., by choosing to not do them at all) I have lost a ton of money. He believes that I should have a slice of pie from the 10,000-crore ghee market, from the makhana madness, from all these startup kids putting kokum now in every soap or cream, and from five-stars who are now serving local dishes for breakfast and not just cold cuts, etc.

On his part, he has given up his corner office, quit his ad job ('*jhooth bol bol ke thak gaya*') and now teaches full time and mentors kids in a premier arts college. He has also scored a side gig to teach classes on creativity in short-term courses at IIM-A. He has signed off his sea-facing Worli flat to his ex,

has paid in advance for his children's education abroad and now divides his time between teaching, looking after his dog and giving free advice to people like me who don't take it.

Wealth is like health. You get to define what it means for you. Does it set you free to pursue your calling? Does it matter what others think about your choice? Is it taking away more than what it brings you? You alone are in a position to answer these questions, and the answers may very well change with time. A sprawling sea-facing apartment may lose its sheen compared to the sight and sounds of ideas of the new generation of students.

Your flex now could be that you give shape and form ideas. Because every good idea is only a pitch and execution away from greatness. 'People don't invest in products, they invest in stories.' That's what your Dalal Street guy is going to tell you if you want to raise money. Tell a story, tell a good one. Tell one that is scalable, tell one of legacy.

Kokum sherbet is that story. The product is kokum, the pitch is that it's a digestive aid and hydrating. But the *baap* is the execution – the sherbet. The best way to create value with the product is to get the execution right – *kya bolte usko*, build an easy-to-use interface.

Kaun kiya yeh execution possible, yeh interface itna smooth? The collective wisdom of our land, of our women – this is our indigenous wealth. The kokum fruit is not just used in sherbets but also as flavouring in dals and sabzis. Even its application as a drink is not just in sherbet, where it's mixed with water, but also in saar, where it's mixed with buttermilk

to stoke the appetite. It is also used in the form of butter to heal cracks on the heels.

So, the fruit of the Western Ghats is like a good movie. A good movie is made on two tables – the writing table and the editing table. Every person from the industry knows this. So, to create value you must first flesh out your idea, and then you must mercilessly cut out the parts that are not relevant to the story you are telling. So, the seed is not there in the drink, the fruit is not a part of the butter, but the seed is, and so on.

But to the diet industry, everything is worth its weight only in profits, not in the value it creates. And so the latest on the bandwagon is what my ad guy calls 'cultural appropriation', and I call 'pseudo-cultural'. It is about picking up indigenous ideas or ingredients and pitching them for weight loss/cleansing /killing cancer, etc., and the execution consists of just consuming a lot of it at one time. If-it's-good-a-lot-of-it-must-be-great kind of a funda. So the interface isn't smooth, it isn't even scalable, but it is milkable until the next trend.

That's also where the trends of 'clean' eating or even 'satvik' eating come in. Monotony rules, diversity is shown the door. If you take a spice like haldi, or a seed like methi, and enter any Indian kitchen, you find hajaar ways of using these ingredients. But where is the value in the small roles they play in ten different foods? Capitalism means *ek hero ingredient ke naam pe dus cheez bechna*. So you now have a haldi pill, a haldi chai, a haldi chocolate (vomit). Spend money, buy #immunity, #guthealth #weightloss #mentalhealth.

The weight-loss industry uses ingredients out of context, focuses only on a single characteristic of each ingredient and makes it what it is not. Black or white with no room for nuance, much like being on X. It's like watching a movie where the writing is bad, the main character has no arc, and everyone else's role is diminished.

One of my clients, a successful founder, was on one of those diets. Soaked seeds in the morning, followed by jeera water, haldi water and moringa powder. Lunch was *quinoa ka khichdi*, dinner *millet ka roti*. And *baja hua hein neend and pet ka band*. He wondered why, because he ate so 'clean'.

'That's the problem, *gandagi chahiye thoda*'. He was from IIT-B, but my joke didn't land.

The thing is that while appropriating culture traditions and packaging them with hashtags is a new trend, it works because of the old problem of intelligent people putting their common sense aside when it comes to food. Or weight loss or health. New practice, old problem. That people are willing to do anything, anything to lose weight. So low cal, low carb, high protein, good fat *kar liya*, *sab* permutations and combinations done and dusted, now culture and ancient traditions *se khelo*.

Sapta dhatu

The Indian belief is that the food we eat nourishes the *sapta dhatu*, or the seven layers of our body – *rasa*, *rakta*, *mamsa*, *medha*, *asthi*, *majja* and *shukra*. Loosely translated, rasa is digestive juices, ratkta is blood, mamsa is muscles, medha is fat, asthi is bones, majja is bone marrow and shukra is sexual fluids. When we fail to eat properly or fall prey to quick fixes, these dhatus don't get the nourishment they need to stay healthy. If you have lost weight earlier but couldn't keep it off, you can think of it as the revenge of the sapta dhatus.

This is the typical weight loss where you say *face se glow chala gaya*, but arms and belly are still fat, or the one where you weigh lesser on the scales but your aunty is asking you why you look sick. The right proportions of food, i.e., not overdoing any one ingredient, are responsible for all the seven dhatus receiving their due. That way, you lose weight in a sustainable manner, lose fat, build better bone density and musculature, regulate your periods and address your micronutrient deficiencies without an injection of vitamin D or B12. It is the type of weight loss where people ask you how much have you lost, 10 kg or 15 kg? And you confess that it's not even a kilogram on the scale, and they decide that you are just lying.

1. Gut cleanses/detox

The *davaa* that is created for the *dard* that unsustainable diets bring. Now you have diets for diets that don't work. I told you that the world of dieting is getting nastier because people are now on many diets at one time. They are fasting and eating only protein, and that too only through 'Ayurvedic' or plant-based foods like zoodles with asparagus and mushrooms in a Buddha bowl.

Or only keto, fat and low carb, dollops of avocado and kale on the side or whatever version of that. The more unrealistic, the better. Caffeine unlimited, and the cream that they put on Starbucks coffee is only 47 kcals please, so it has to be ol
When you go through days and weeks of this, you break
does your gut integrity, your resolve and your common se
Then you treat yourself over the weekend to chocolate cake, chhole bhature and chips. Some wine and shots on the side because *apne #bhaikabudday* or some other equally worthy occasion like #groomdoom or *#dulhankigang*, or you are simply chilling with friends.

Come Monday morning and you are on a #gutcleanse. The dream of the #gutreset allows you the nightmare of the weekend where you eat and drink all that you don't need because you are going to clean up anyway. In an alternative world, Krishna is telling Arjun that not just the words you speak or the arrows you shoot, but what you binge-eat over the weekend cannot be recalled, much less cleansed.

risk because of the loss of electrolytes, due to the diarrhoea, vomiting and the dehydration it causes. The whole point, after all, is to age well and look good. So it just can't be left for the Insta reels to say things like 'These are not my wrinkles but my medals'. You must also learn to be mature with age.

In real life, if it's a 42- or 52-inch waistline and not a 32- or a 28-inch one, it's ok. You can reduce it to under 36 inches in a year or two, steadily and sustainably. Without the drama and delusion that detox brings, shrinking to half in a week and expanded to double in three days flat. 'Even normal speed will get you there' is one of my favourite Border Roads Organisation (BRO) road signs, and that applies to our bodies too.

Gut doesn't need cleansing

Ek hi dil hai kitni baar jeetoge, ek hi gut hai kitni baar cleanse karoge? Instead, learn the term 'health-washed'. Like brainwashed, where logic is put aside to accept a narrative as fact, health-washing is where an extreme practice is pushed as a healthy one. Like cleansing, where you first wash your sins with mixtures of salts, oils, warm water and other such 'detoxifying' agents. The nausea, loosies and giddiness it creates is celebrated as 'cleansing' and not seen as threatening. But they are, to good health. Health, you must remember, is in the balance.

And this may break your heart, but just like how you don't need to send ugly teddy bears on V Day, you don't need to

drink up pink, yellow, green potions to cleanse your system. Actually, you don't need any external aid to clean your system, barring bathing, brushing and rinsing your mouth after food. Everything else is just full time-pass. And costly. Not just to the inheritance of money but to the wealth of flora and fauna that resides right from your mouth to your anus.

We inherit good microbes from our parents, take a lifetime to build on it and then risk washing it away with all the 'cleansing'. Irrespective of whether they are called '*kriyas*', 'detoxes' or 'gut resets', they will take away the good with the bad. The body has natural ways to deal with the bad – it is called gut permeability; an inbuilt system to keep the good protected from the bad microbes. It also has the liver, the kidneys, lungs and skin, which constantly detoxify the [illegible] without making any fuss, and for free. Free, free.

Good health and a good gut are built by the routine practices of eating home food, exercising and sleeping on time. And the gut is really just a stylish way to address your digestive system. In the nineties, girlfriends were called '*jaan*' or '*jaanu*', now they are called 'baby', but *Urdu ho ya angrezi, hai toh future biwi hi.*

The thing to remember is that every cleanse puts you on the path to the next one in a couple of months. This is because a depleted gut flora causes bloating and gas, and then we fix it by eating a very limited diet. Most things begin to leave our plate; the stuff we grew up eating now troubles us. This is because the bacteria needed to digest and break down food has been flushed down the drain.

Instead of these cycles, build a diverse diet – one that your grandma will smile upon. Because diversity breeds diversity.

#guthealth

The more protein from 'products', the lesser the fibre from natural sources (remember what I told you about the food matrix). And so, in the recent past, you must have seen the rise and rise of the hashtag #guthealth. So, you ate all the protein diligently, and now you are taking more time in the bathroom and are considering a gut cleanse. But before that, how about some fibre as a prebiotic? Maybe this one drink or pill can fix your constipation and flatulence?

Who would have imagined that the likes of Isabgol would run ads with celebrity endorsement, with airport and highway placements? '*Kabz aap ko hota hai par pata sab ko hota hai.*' When Rishi Kapoor delivered this line, it reminded me all over again why all budding actors are taught to watch him emote in songs.

But coming back to the point, one product creating a market for another product is the best kind of business ever. And you will find many influencers telling you that all you need is protein, fibre and omega (not the watch, the fat). I say, learn from them. That conviction is all you need to propose to your next girlfriend, pitch your next idea, plan your next home décor.

2. Fasting

One of the prime examples of cultural appropriation is the new trend of fasting. We already discussed IF in the previous chapter, but it's also portrayed as being 'part of our culture/ an age-old practice/*pehle hum din mein do meals hi khate the*', etc. So I want to touch upon fasting in this section, but from the cultural point of view.

One of the pillars of Hinduism is the idea that while everything is turbulent and unpredictable, there is one thing that is constant, one's *shraddha* or devotion to the higher reality; and hopefully, with that, the realization of all that is impermanent. *Bhasmantam shareeram* – eventually the body is reduced to ashes. Coming from the land of yoga, intellectually at least, we all buy into that. But emotionally, our attachment to the body is strong.

Six stages of the body

Vedanta philosophy categorizes the body into six distinct stages through the life cycle of a person. Please bear in mind that the English translations are loose, to say the least, but you will very much get the drift.

Asti – Existence. The body exists, right from the time you are in the womb.

Jayate – It is born. And now can have a life of its own.

Vardhate – It grows. The body grows with time. The naturally anabolic stage.

Viparinamite – It changes or matures. Whether it's with puberty or age.

Apakshiyate – It deteriorates. Yes, that does happen with time. The naturally catabolic stage of the body.

Vinaschiyati – It dies. Hopefully with ripe old age and nothing else, but die it surely will.

This is also what YOLO means. That you will get to experience all of this exactly once in your life. So don't be in the past or in the future in your head, stay in the present and make the most of it.

Whenever it's Ramzan, Navratri or Paryushan, my inbox is flooded with 'What can I do to lose weight during this time' messages. *Iss hamam mein, hum sab nange hai.* Fasting, in fact, is about rethinking everything that consumes us, be it the obsession with weight loss, the body or the food we eat. It has four pillars:

1. *Swadhyaya* – Study of the self. It was meant as a practice that honed the mind, body and senses. It meant for us to go inside, to connect with the formless, nameless, genderless, all-pervasive life-force. And, sorry to break your heart, but no fast was meant for #detox, #cleanse, #weightloss. Which is why, in Sanskrit, it's called 'upa-

vaas'– being in proximity to the supreme being – and not called by a term that translates into 'guaranteed weight loss'.

2. *Tapa* – Voluntary renunciation (of certain foods, for example). It was meant as a practice of introducing diversity to one's diet. To appreciate all that nature offers as food and to understand that health and harmony come from diversity. So, if Lent encouraged followers to go #meatfree and include more veggies in the diet, then Paryushan brought the millets and pulses into the spotlight by removing green veggies from the plate. Navratri or Ekadashi placed emphasis on tubers like suran and arbi, millets like rajgeera, etc., with generous offering of nuts. And Ramzan on dates, fresh fruits and homemade milkshakes. Diversity is the key here, not deprivation.
3. *Maitri* – Friendship and celebration of seasons, rituals and family bonds. Essentially, fasting was a practice that allowed you to understand that variety is the spice of life. The fast didn't come randomly but followed a calendar that was based in a deeper understanding of nature. The celebratory meals were, and are, for everyone, the ones who fast and the ones who don't. The ones who believe and the ones who don't. No one gets a lecture on fasting at the celebrations, everyone is goaded to eat more.
4. *Karuna* – Compassion. Any grandmother who follows roza will tell you that it is a reminder that no one should go hungry, and hence the practice of *anna daan,* almost on a daily basis, during Ramzan. In fact, irrespective of

the name or the origin of the fast, if one developed a headache, nausea or weakness, it wasn't an endorsement of the effectiveness of the practice (wow, toxins are coming out) or something that one must endure, but an indication that the fast must be stopped and normal routine should be resumed.

Which is also why the very old, the very young, the pregnant, the ailing, women on periods, lactating mothers, etc., were discouraged from fasting. The idea was to be sensitive to pain and to understand it, not endure it. And to lead a life where one doesn't cause pain to oneself or to others around.

P.S. – *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, one of the guiding texts of yoga, says that anyone on the path of yoga should stay away from all extremes, including fasting.

But isn't fasting a spiritual practice?

'What do you think, Rujuta?' asked one of my clients. She had just been to an ashram, taken *diksha* from her guru and done a course which she said had re-engineered, re-imagined and re-birthed her. I was happy for her, but she was conflicted. The guru wanted her to eat only twice a day, and after her battle with weight and self-image for over twenty-five years, she had just begun to eat correctly. She started her day with raisins, ate breakfast, ate a fruit in between, had lunch, a snack, and then went on to have dinner. And she had never felt lighter or

looked better. The migraines had gone, the waist was narrow; sleep, even poop, was better, but now this *dharma sankat*. 'You think I should let go of this body trap and follow spirituality? Eat only twice and focus on my breathing instead of food if I get hungry?'

You know, the only reality check the world needs is kindness and compassion. It's even good for business. And I learnt this a long time ago. So, if one of my clients comes back with something unrealistic for their daily lives that is recommended by their favourite friend, guru or trainer, I don't put the advice or the advisor in a bad light. Ridiculing doesn't work, reasoning does. After all, we are just trying fo[r] that sweet middle, the *suvarna madhyam*.

In Sarika's case, I reminded her that the guru was beyo[nd] the realm of the body but that she was planning for IVF; we needed to nurture her body. 'Sarika, it won't work. What a mahatma can achieve, we can't. And that is why even in the ashram, there is a café, isn't there? He may instruct you to eat only twice, but the café on the premises is open all hours so that followers can be gentle on themselves. Continue what is working for you, eat the way you have been eating, and integrate the spiritual practices you have learnt in the ashram. But don't give up your food, dreams and ambitions for it.'

And as a footnote, I would like to add – though I didn't say this to Sarika – that in the Sant and Warkari *parampara* of Maharashtra, it's '*pehila potoba, nantar vithoba*'. It means that all spirituality talk is humbug when the stomach is empty.

I told you; I will repeat it: Whether it's health, science or spirituality, the ones who watch it up close and personal have a view that is rooted in practicality, far away from the narrative of miracles that claim to cure all that ails the mind and body.

3. Seeds and spices

Akele nahin, ek saath

There was a time when people would dutifully avoid spices, '*Hum bas saada khaana khate hai*, no masala for us.' Today they start the day with shots of haldi, jeera, methi daana and what not. Traditional foods, yes, but consumed in novel ways set by the food and weight-loss industries. On my recent UK trip, I stayed at a posh hotel but took the room-only rate. The server, however, would send me the shot of the day for free. One day it was a turmeric shot and the next day a cinnamon one. *Ek zamane mein* it would be soup of the day, and you would need to pay for it. Or if you were a pretty girl, a guy would buy you a drink, a shot of vodka maybe. Now rout girls like me get sent spice shots for free.

Truth be told, our collective wisdom of using seeds or spices is thousands of years old. Their use, in predetermined combinations and proportions, has been orally transmitted for generations. They were used to enhance the flavour of food and to improve assimilation of nutrients in combination with other ingredients, and never consumed in large quantities by themselves. Essentially, this took care of the naturally existing anti-nutrients in food (which come in the way of nutrient absorption) and ensured that food was used and not abused as therapy.

For example, haldi was always used with fat, like in a tadka in oil or with milk, and not as haldi shots in water. Similarly, the use of methi dana or curry patta in tadka, making flaxseed

chutney, and so on, was part of regular kitchen practices so that you consume them in the right proportion. We undervalue the priceless wisdom of our women folk and their selfless labour in our kitchens and land up paying a big price (monetarily and health wise) by following diet trends. If a little is good, then a lot is not better. And your dadi did know better than your dietician.

Aliv seeds

After I wrote about aliv seeds in *Indian Superfoods*, it was like the world had discovered them. Soon after, I would find people taking garden cress seeds soaked in water on an empty stomach in an attempt to improve their hair growth and Hb levels.

The seeds are a source of folic acid, iron, etc., yes, but their magic is in the process – the soaking in the nariyal pani, the mixing in ghee, jaggery and coconut, cooking it all on low heat in an iron *kadhai* and rolling them into a laddoo upon cooling. But the fear of weight gain would keep them away from ghee, jaggery and coconut. And then just the seeds would mean stomach distress and little or no impact on Hb levels.

The best way for the assimilation of nutrients without any undue load on the GI tract is to keep up with the time-tested combinations. And this is not just about aliv seeds, it is true

even for cinnamon shots, methi shots, whatever shots. The blood sugar-lowering properties are in the full combination not in a singular ingredient. And what matters is the complete meal and not individual nutrients.

Think of each spice like a person. A real person comes with the good and the bad. There are environments like families, teams, friends, etc., that enable the good. And then, if by chance you meet this person without his wife or outside his work environment, you don't really like him any more. The proportion and the setting in which he was good is taken away, and now that you have a lot of him, and it begins to make you feel restless, uncomfortable, stressed. Experienced this?

Well, spices are exactly like that. Too much of them (shots and pills), then say hello to acne, missed periods and bloating. Too little of them, and say bye bye to smooth skin, pain-free periods and a flat stomach.

The spice box

What can a humble spice dabba found in every single Indian kitchen teach us about health and nutrition? That there are a variety of spices we use daily, that we use them in small quantities and that we mostly use them in cooking. However, if we go by the latest fads of using spices, which mostly consists of adding them to water and drinking it first thing in the morning, we will be refilling this dabba every few days and not every few weeks, as we usually do.

Antinutrients

One client recently told me that he was eating soaked methi seeds daily to lower his HbA1c. He was upset that it hadn't worked even when he was advised that eating them on an empty stomach would mimic insulin. The thing is that all natural foods, in addition to having therapeutic properties, also have something called anti-nutrients – naturally existing molecules like oxalates, phytates, tannins, lectins, goitrogens, etc. – which can come in the way of nutrient assimilation.

This means that they can actually prevent the active or therapeutic ingredient that you seek from the food from reaching you, even if you ate a lot of it. Now, you can't remove the anti-nutrient, but you can neutralize its effect by soaking, sprouting, cooking and combining them with other foods like they were always meant to be.

Consuming any spice or seed like a pill is therefore not effective. But as a part of your dietary pattern of eating them in a tadka, as a chutney, laddoo, etc., remains a sane and safe way to regulate blood sugars, control BP, beat obesity and whatnot (because regular home-cooked food just works, and works like magic). Whereas raw, by itself and on an empty stomach is the ghettoization of nutrients, and whether it's people or nutrients, ghettos are just a poor way to live or eat.

4. Millets

The new maida

Sometimes we begin a reintroduction of all things ancient in our diet without context. Millets have gone through something like that. I could write a whole book on their goodness, but there's a good chance that you may already know it all – they are rich in micronutrients, they are dense in fibre, they can help regulate blood sugars, blood pressure and even help with weight loss. And with that information, millets are the new – and it breaks my heart to say this – maida.

Everything that was once made with maida – biscuits, cakes, breads, noodles, etc. – is now being made with millets so that more profit can be made by positioning it as healthy. But as we now know, good health isn't about replacing x with y; it is about understanding the context, and then, if needed, reintroducing it in our daily diets.

The makeover of millet

I was at a NITI Aayog event where there was a panel discussion on millets. The chief of NITI Aayog spoke about how calling millets 'coarse cereals' was a misstep and gave them the tag of being a poor man's food. He said they were now called 'nutri-cereals', which reflected the reality of millets better. He went on to wonder though, if policymakers

were doing enough to ensure that millet awareness didn't just mean shifting millets from the poor man's plate to the rich man's. Millet awareness, he said, must translate into more land under cultivation (important for climate mitigation), and entry of millets in the PDS (for beating malnutrition), and shouldn't get reduced to #millets. Because real change starts from the soil and the ones who toil on it. Farm-food-fitness are interlinked in more ways than you can think.

As a Maharashtrian, I have grown up eating bhakri, or millet roti, at one meal daily. In the farming communities, it is bhakri for lunch. In working Marathi households, it's typically bhakri for dinner, as they taste nicer when consumed hot. Also, because we now lack the skill or competence that is required to make them in a way where they taste great even when they are no longer hot.

To move the bhakri to dinner time is a practical, sensible adaptation. One rooted in ground reality. Adaptations of all good things have to be thought through, or else they are #epicfail. Anyone who works in policymaking understands the glocal concept. Just because it's a great policy that worked wonders somewhere doesn't mean you can pick it up and dump it here, too. You will have to make revisions or adopt only a part of it so that the outcomes are as desired.

If the outcome you wish out of millets is a lean body, great figure, better Hb levels, lower blood sugar, blood pressure, etc.,

then replacing all things maida with millets won't help. Nor will it help that you now have your gaucamole with millet chips, your stew with millet noodles or your veggies with millet pasta or the lettuce with pearl millet.

It means that you must learn how to roll a bhakri and have it with your sabzi. Or you pick an easier recipe and make a ragi dosa instead. Or you could make the easy lassi, kheers or laddoos with millets. The problem is that we want the millets without the baggage they come with – the labour, the sugar, the ghee, the pulses – only because these other ingredients are not the flavour of the month. But that's not how digestion works. This baggage that it comes with are actually agents that make it easier for your body to assimilate the goodness of millets. Without this, it is just another trend that is waiting to get replaced by yet another.

A lesson from Vishal Bharadwaj

Vishal and Rekha Bharadwaj had come over for dinner, and I was telling Rekha ji how I can still hear the ghazal that she sang at one of her live programs at Prithvi theatre. Small, intimate audience, with hardly any instruments and no mic. *Gulon mein rang bhare* was the ghazal, and it sounded even better than Mehdi Hassan's, even though she sang it exactly like he did. Some things are so precious that they should not be changed, and yet, like a time-tested recipe, when you make it, your individuality shines through. VB then asked me if I

had heard his version, and I said no, sorry, I hadn't. He then went on to narrate how this was one of his favourite ghazals and he had set the tune for the *antara* in his own style. Arijit Singh was supposed to record it. He had heard it, loved it and had said, 'Let me go out for some fresh air and I will come back and record it.' Ten, twenty, thirty minutes later, there was no sign of Arijit, and when VB had called him, he had said, 'I have left the studio, I can't sing this version because my guru always sang the OG.'

VB said he had to get his team to slowly warm up Arijit to listen to his tune, allow it to grow on him and to understand the thought process behind it. Only then was it recorded. It took months, but the VB version sung by Arijit is beautiful too. The next time you want to take a millet and turn it into something creative or take a wild vegetable and turn it into a mocktail, ask yourself – are you a genius like VB, because even he left the *mukhada* of the ghazal unchanged. The magic is in the familiarity, not in the creativity.

Eating millets the right way

1. *Eat millets according to season*

   Eating seasonal not only ensures easy availability of nutrients at just the time they are needed, but it also ties in beautifully with farming practices and crop cycles. Here is a quick guide to which millets work best for which season:

- Bajra is for the winters – eat it with jaggery and ghee
- Jowar is better for summers – eat it with a chutney
- Ragi/nachni is eaten all year round, but especially during the rains, and can even be turned into dosa, laddoo, porridge, etc.
- The lesser-known millets are usually linked to change of season and are mostly tied to festivals – millets like raajgira, samo, kuttu and others.

This is also the reason you shouldn't use ready-made multi-grain flour, as it goes against the time-tested wisdom of eating as per the season.

2. *Eat millets in the right food combinations*
Combining millets with pulses, spices and fats ensures that limiting amino acids are compensated for, protein quality and digestibility improved and the effect of antinutrients reduced. Millets that are particularly hard to digest, like bajra, even come with rules – e.g., always have them with a dollop of makhan or an extra teaspoon of ghee and never without jaggery. One can't but marvel at dadis and nanis *ke gharelu nuskhe* and their saral, sasta and sundar methods of turning every meal into a joy, long after it's been consumed.

Listen to your wife

I was once on a solo holiday in Haridwar, staying at a boutique homestay. It was the last week of December, but before the New Year madness. It was beautiful and quiet. On the table next to me for dinner was a couple, ten to fifteen years older than me. I was enjoying their conversation, it was full of warmth, of temples they had visited, the street food they tried, the perfect weather, etc. Then the wife told the husband to eat jaggery with the ragi roti they were having. 'You didn't eat it in the morning also,' she said.

'I just want to know the logic,' he replied.

'You don't need to know everything, Rajat, just eat it,' she said. I was loving this. Then I overheard that they were leaving for Delhi within the next twenty minutes for a meeting in the morning.

'Oh no,' I thought to myself, and I said aloud to them that this was the most romantic dinner I had ever witnessed.

'Oh! I won't hear the end of it now,' the husband said to me, while the wife winked at me playfully.

Sometimes I talk too much, and I said to the husband, 'You must just listen to your wife, you know, about the jaggery.'

'I am an engineer; I need to understand why jaggery with ragi roti.'

'It's a hygiene practice, like how you would calibrate instruments before use daily, clean vessels before producing the next batch, check brakes before you go on a long drive.'

I had no idea what kind of engineer he was, *toh jitna example aata tha, sab bol diya*. 'The thing is, when you eat jaggery with ragi, or any millet for that matter, you reduce errors, you ease out digestion.'

'See, this I understand. Shikha, you could have told me this,' he said to his wife.

'She doesn't need to, you must just always listen to your wife,' I winked back at her. Honestly, I always pray that husbands don't listen to their wives and kids to their mothers, because that's the only way people like me can stay in business.

3. *Eat millets in all forms*
   The diversity in the ways we can consume millets is staggering. They can be germinated and fermented for satva, kheer or porridge; they can be soaked and cooked to make khichdis; they can be made into bhakris and roasted to make laddoos. All this ensured that there was no taste fatigue or boredom in eating nutritious, healthy food.

4. *Don't replace all grains with millets*
   Lastly, know that millets are not a replacement for rice and wheat. At least not a complete replacement. Again, it comes back to sustainability and common sense. So, continue with the rice and/or wheat for normal consumption, but don't forget the weekly bhakri and the seasonal laddoos and porridge.

Making a millet bhakri

Is there a way for us to eat millets where we can access all of their nutrients and create no ecological waste? Yes, there is. And it is a well-known one. Just use your millets and convert them into a bhakri/rotla. Eat them with a sabzi, dal or chutney.

I know that it's tough to make rotlas and that they break, so I am going to share a kitchen secret on how to roll them without breaking. Use warm water when kneading the atta, and then hand-press them, instead of rolling out, before you put them on your iron tava to cook.

Devil's advocate

So how can we include an ancient food or eating practice in our daily life?

Nostalgia, like memory, is a funny thing. It can be hyper-focused on one aspect and miss out on the big picture. We can forget how this one detail fitted into the larger scheme of things. Something like that has happened not just with millets but also with all things 'ancient', be it the food - seeds and spices, etc. - or practices like fasting, kriyas and so on. And when we forget how it fits into the larger scheme of things, we reduce it to what it is not - a miracle molecule, or worse, a miracle cure. Then, of course,

the backlash comes that none of this actually works and is all humbug or pseudo-science.

Years ago, I used to do a small session on posture and stretching during Arvind Nadkarni's workshops on communication. He was a brilliant communicator and motivator. This was in the late nineties, when Indian corporate communication had started changing. From hardened sales teams to newly minted CEOs, he would teach them all how to write emails, speak in public and negotiate without breaking into a sweat.

He would swap the traditional U-style conference or classroom seating for gaddas on the floor. I had almost never seen middle-aged men so happy and so eager to learn. I was just starting my career then, and he was a good friend's dad. So he would give me a slot in his one-day or two-day workshops and pay me ₹1,500 for the hour I spoke to his people about health and fitness. I would always look forward to these sessions – opportunity, money, safety, something new to learn and a fun time with Arvind uncle. One of the things I learnt at these sessions was ATTTA – grab their Attention, Tell them what you are going to tell them, Tell them, Tell them what you just told them, and leave them with an Actionable.

Basically, if you have something to say *joh dil ko chu jaaye*, you have to say it right. Similarly, the *tareeka* or method or recipe or process is as critical for the individual ingredients too, to deliver the promise of health and happiness. And that's why cooking or cuisine is the mainstay

of all ancient foods and practices. It teaches you a step-by-step guide to using the ingredient to its full potential, both in terms of taste and efficacy. Culture teaches you how frequently to eat something, celebration or routine, and even guides you as to what to mix it with – ghee, milk, jaggery or rice – based on the occasion. Climate teaches you how to store food and what time of the day to eat it. Essentially, it is difficult to separate culture, climate and cuisine from one another, and without fully utilizing the knowledge of each of them, you stand to only lose from all things ancient.

Food and medicine

Pharmocology is similar to cooking, it's about following the most efficient process/recipe for drug delivery. The paracetamol on your shelf has been made into a round tablet that doesn't hurt the throat when you swallow, has been created with the right delivery agents that the stomach acid can work on, and formulated in the right quantities. If you take too much of paracetamol it could be fatal, too little and there would not even be pain relief.

Essentially, even a routine drug can be ineffective or even dangerous if it's not taken in the right way/context. Lab-made or kitchen-made, without the active ingredients, indications, contra-indications and right dosage, everything is just that – useless at best.

Food combinations, then, matter even more. As we saw, you can't just take millet and make everything out of it. To get the best out of it, you have to take it in the right combos, portions and proportions. Same with seeds or spices. What works are the time-tested processes or recipes. That's why they exist – they are fragile-proof, as they are called. We will learn more about combinations, proportions and portions in the next section of the book.